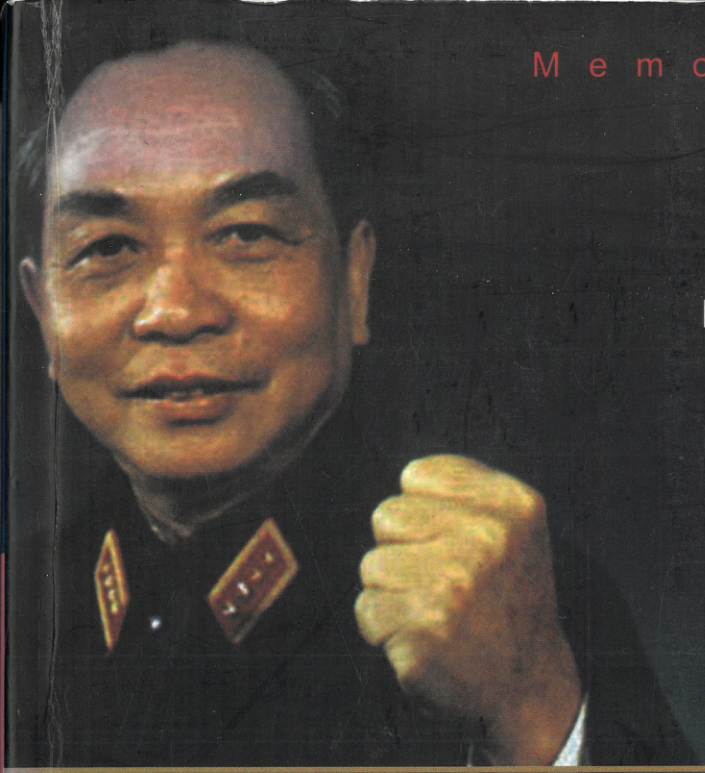
Memoirs of War



**General Giáp**
Remembers the Road
to Sài Gòn, 1975

# GENERAL GIÁP

## The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory

Thế Giới Publishers

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(MEMOIRS)

GENERAL
**VÕ NGUYÊN GIÁP**

# THE GENERAL HEADQUARTERS IN THE SPRING OF BRILLIANT VICTORY

**(MEMOIRS)**

**THẾ GIỚI PUBLISHERS**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ***Chapter I:*** | The Battle of "Điện Biên Phủ in the air" | 1 |
| ***Chapter II:*** | The Historic Conference | 23 |
| ***Chapter III:*** | Fundamental Plan and Opportunity Plan | 63 |
| ***Chapter IV:*** | Making Strategic Decisions | 105 |
| ***Chapter V:*** | Blow at a Neuralgic Point | 130 |
| ***Chapter VI:*** | Turning the Offensive into a General Offensive | 161 |
| ***Chapter VII:*** | The Start of the Battle of Sài Gòn | 193 |
| ***Chapter VIII:*** | The Liberation of the Trường Sa Archipelago | 220 |
| ***Chapter IX:*** | The Hồ Chí Minh Campaign | 227 |
| ***Chapter X:*** | Some Reflections | 261 |

*Chapter I*

# THE BATTLE OF "ĐIỆN BIÊN PHỦ IN THE AIR"

Hà Nội, December 1972.

Winter temperatures had registered well below normal. The cold of the season, added to the quietude of Hà Nội, which had just received a total evacuation order, made the weather seem even chillier.

In Paris, the talks between Việt Nam and the United States had reached a critical stage. Following months of frenetic election campaigns marked by "shuttle diplomacy" and peace promises, President Nixon had managed to keep the White House for a second term. In Sài Gòn, the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu puppet administration, fretting over a series of unfavorable provisions in the Việt Nam-US Agreement of October 18, 1972, had begun to react fiercely towards its American boss.

Meetings between the sides in late November and early December had brought about no results whatsoever. In the meantime, the Americans rushed to deliver to Thiệu as many weapons and war materials as they had done over the course of the entire previous year.

To appease Thiệu and attempt to bargain further with us, Nixon arrogantly demanded changes be made to various provisions of the draft agreement seemingly about to be signed after more than three years of talks at the International Conference Center in Kleber Avenue.

Of course, we did not accept them.

The situation was very pressing. For several days on end, Văn Tiến Dũng[1] and I had been returning home late from our Headquarters, where we often worked until midnight.

1. Then Chief of the General Staff of the Việt Nam People's Army.

Developments on the diplomatic front foretold new developments on the military front. We directed our military intelligence and combat agencies to report regularly on enemy troop movements and buildings, and requested that the Foreign Ministry provide us with timely information on what was happening at the Paris Conference. Throughout this period we considered once again the advice given by Uncle Hồ during a visit to the Headquarters of the Air Defence-Air Force in early 1968: "Sooner or later, the US imperialists will send B52s to bomb Hà Nội. Only a failure in this attempt would reconcile them to defeat"[1]. We assessed that the Americans might deploy B52 strategic bombers, their last bargaining trump card in a concentrated effort to attack rear positions of North Việt Nam.

Through eight years of fighting against the US war of destruction, Việt Nam had recorded many military successes and obtained much experience. But it remained virtually impossible to counter the destructive force of sustained B52 strikes.

In mid-1965, the US began using B52s to strike at a number of our bases in the South. On April 12, 1966, B52s attacked Mụ Giạ Pass (Quảng Bình Province) on a stretch of Highway 17 along the Việt Nam-Lao border. At that time, Uncle Hồ instructed Đặng Tính, Political Commissar of the Air Defence-Air Force, to develop counter measures against B52s. In May 1966, Missile Regiment 238 was sent to Vĩnh Linh to implement new measures to combat B52s. Here, on September 17, 1967, this regiment shot down the first B52.

In February 1968, the Central Military Committee forecasted possible B52 attacks on Hà Nội and Hải Phòng and directed the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force to prepare combat plans. Subsequently, several groups of Air Defence-Air Force cadres along with a number of missile regiments and an assault air force unit were assigned the task of studying ways to fight B52s in the air space over Military Zone IV (stretching from Thanh Hóa Province to Huế).

1. Hồ Chí Minh. *Annals of Military Events and Military Documents.* People's Army Publishing House, Hà Nội, 1990, p. 204.

In May 1972, attempting to pressure us at the negotiations, Nixon ordered the implementation of the Linebacker Air Campaign in which B52s were used to drop hundreds of thousands of tons of bombs in an attempt to stop the strong support of the North to our troops in the South. This was an opportunity for us to study the way to fight this kind of US strategic planes.

Preparations to fight B52s were diligently undertaken and completed in the main by early September 1972. On the basis of combat experiences and increasing knowledge about US weapons, military equipment and information, the document *The Way to Fight B52s* contributed to effective troop training. It is noteworthy that although the aid afforded by the Soviet Union in terms of weapons and techniques was largely valuable and effective, not a single Soviet missile had been provided since 1969. As missile and radar equipment was gradually downgraded, our cadres and fighters were required to promote initiatives to improve techniques and raise the combat effectiveness of the weapons and equipment available.

On November 22, 1972, Missile Regiment 263, in western Nghệ An Province, shot down a B52 which ultimately crashed west of Nakhomphanom, 64 km from Utapao Base in Thailand. (This report was confirmed by the US news agency UPI. Although the plane was not shot down on the spot, a creative theory began to be tested by practice.)

The reports of the Military Intelligence Department at the Chief of Staff Office's daily briefings showed that the US was frantically preparing the establishment of a unified command of the Strategic Air Force directing both the Utapao and the Anderson (Guam) Bases. Over half the B52s of the US Air Force were housed in these two bases. KC135 refueling aircraft, reconnaissance and electronic jamming planes were concentrated in the Subic Base (the Philippines).

The Combat Department was directed to remain on duty 24 hours everyday.

On November 24, 1972, at the Headquarters of the Air Defence-Air Force, Văn Tiến Dũng ratified the plan of Hà Nội air-defence

forces to combat B52s and directed all preparatory work to be completed by December 3.

The air-defence positions of all the three kinds of armed forces stood combat-ready.

On December 18, 1972, Department II reported at its daily briefing:

"At 5h00 a.m., we intercepted an enemy message from the airfield inquiring: 'Where is the medical aid helicopter today?' At noon of the same day, an RF4C of the US Air Force flying over Hà Nội reported to its base: "The weather around Hà Nội today allows activities." Over Zone IV , there was a sudden reduction of activity. In particular, there was not a single group of B52s. There was no active jamming of radar stations by the surveillance network. These were abnormal signs, only one day after the Air Defence-Air Force unit received orders to stand highly combat ready."

On December 18, 1972, the security plane BH195[1], carrying Lê Đức Thọ home from Paris, landed at Gia Lâm Airport. At about the same time, Nixon issued an ultimatum demanding that we return to the negotiating table in Paris in three days and at US conditions.

19h10. One of the four telephones on priority-one regime rang up in my bureau at the Army Headquarters.

The voice of the combat duty comrade sounded very clearly:

- I would like to report that B52s have taken off from Guam, Utapao... Several groups flew northwards along the Mekong River. The Air Defence-Air Force are on first grade alert.

A few minutes later, the siren sounded.

19h45. Bomb explosions thundered in the distance. The Air Defence-Air Force Command reported that enemy planes were

1. The plane formerly reserved to President Hồ Chí Minh. It bore the codename BH (Uncle Hồ) and his birthday (May 19).

striking at Hòa Lạc Airfield. Subsequently, several B52 flights attacked Nội Bài and Gia Lâm Airfields. The dry and heavy roaring of B52 engines grew increasingly distinct. Flames flared up continuously followed by sky-shaking explosions. Hà Nội's air-defence missiles flew up into the sky, shattering orange streaks of light in the Hà Nội night.

The Army Headquarters were working hurriedly.

I requested the Army Chief of Staff's Office to make reports at five minute intervals.

Department II reported that Nixon had ordered the beginning of Linebaker II Operation. Using B52 strategic bombers from the US bases in Thailand, Guam and the Philippines, US forces were to strike at Hà Nội while F111s attacked nearby airfields. This Operation had been discussed and finalized by Nixon, Kissinger and General Haig in the White House's Oval Room on December 14. Pursuant to this plan, the Command of the Provisional Strategic Air Force Division 57 was set up. Fifty additional refueling KC135 planes were sent to the Philippines. In the Bắc Bộ Gulf, five aircraft carriers were already operational.

The Combat Operations Department made diligent efforts to acquire information about the situation and conveyed repeated orders to the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force.

20h20. The telephone rang again. On the other side of the line was Nguyễn Quang Bích, Deputy Commander of the Air Defence-Air Force:

- General, at 20h16, Battalion 59 of Missile Regiment 261 of the Hà Nội Air Defence Forces shot down on the spot one B52.

I asked:

- Is it truly a B52?

- Yes, General.

A moment later, Nguyễn Quang Bích reported that this was a B52G which had taken off from Guam. It had crashed at Phù Lỗ commune, Đông Anh ditrict, in the suburbs of Hà Nội.

News of this victory broke the tense atmosphere. The Army Headquarters were jubilant: the B52 bugbear was no longer "impregnable" in the face of the Thăng Long air-defence missiles.

I stepped out of the Headquarters. It was very cold. A fine drizzle was falling. But I felt extraordinarily warm in my heart.

During the night of December 18 to 19, wave after wave of B52s and tactical aircraft struck at Đông Anh, Yên Viên, Mễ Trì, Gia Lâm, and Hòa Mục[1]... Hà Nội was plunged into flames and smoke.

At 4h39 of December 19, Battalion 77 of Missile Regiment 257 downed a second B52 which crashed in a nearby field of Tân Hưng commune, Thanh Oai district, Hà Tây province.

It was a historic coincidence that Hà Nội had again opened fire at an enemy exactly 26 years after the anti- French resistance war erupted.

It is to be recalled that in September 1971, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee made the following assessment: The enemy would pull out in 1972 if a settlement was reached; otherwise, he could muster aircraft for attacks. We needed to take precautions. On the following day, as the Secretary of the Central Military Committee, I issued the following instruction to all Party cells in the army: "B52s will not limit their strikes to the South. To some extent, they may attack Hà Nội. The Air Defence-Air Force must carefully study this problem." The anti-aircraft, radar, missile units and the air force therefore received the order to engage in combat training. A number of missile positions, mobile anti-aircraft emplacements and field aerodromes were secretly established. The militia and self-defence units in Hà Nội and a number of other cities were provided with anti-aircraft fire. Moreover, observation and information work was strengthened.

On November 25, 1972, in a directive on the strengthening of combat readiness, the Central Military Committee reaffirmed: "In the forthcoming period, the enemy may resume bombing and strafing raids against targets north of the 20th parallel with increased fierceness. He may rashly use B52s to strike at Hà Nội,

1. Suburbs of Hà Nội.

Hải Phòng, etc." On November 27, the High Command assessed that the possibility of B52 attacks on Hà Nội was significant, and directed the armed forces to increase its combat preparations. In a message to the Central Bureau for South Việt Nam and the B2[1] command, the Central Military Committee also forecasted this possibility. In spite of this, due to an inadequate understanding of US plans to strike, greater stress was laid on the possibility of B52 attacks on areas between Thanh Hóa and Quảng Trị As a result, in early December, a missile regiment was dispatched to Zone IV. Subsequently, hundreds of additional Hà Nội air-defence missiles were transported there.

On the morning of December 19, before smoke from the bomb fire had dissipated, the Politburo met at the Army Headquarters for a report of the General Chief of Staff's Office on the first night of counter strikes against B52s. It commended the Air Defence forces and directed them to resolutely smash any new military actions embarked on by US forces.

That afternoon, before a gathering of numerous Vietnamese and foreign correspondents at the Hà Nội International Club, the spokesman of the National Defence Ministry exposed the enemy's criminal action during the night of December 18 and publicized accounts given by the Vietnamese army and various citizens who had helped destroy B52s. It was reported that the six American prisoners-of-war had admitted their fear of the Hà Nội air-defence forces' heavy fire.

On the night of December 19, the enemy effected 87 B52 sorties, only three fewer than the previous night. Our troops fought ineffectively due to their failure to carry out the instructions of the army formation and the launching of missiles because of concerns over ammunition shortage.

The enemy's tactic was to launch night attacks with B52s flying in at an altitude of 11 km to avoid the fire of anti-aircraft guns. Day and night, the enemy mustered attack aircraft, with jamming devices to strike at airfields and missile emplacements in the hope

1. Nam Bộ, or South Việt Nam.

of eliminating the threat of the two main forces capable of striking at B52s, namely the Vietnamese Air Defence missiles and aircraft.

Văn Tiến Dũng met with the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force formation and directed it to bring into play the strength of the various military units to actively create conditions for our Air Force to strike at B52s, and to promote the effectiveness of anti-aircraft artillery in fighting enemy planes flying at low altitudes. He also provided specific guidance on how to sustain a continuous and prolonged fight.

Under the Command of the army formation, the missile battalion quickly gained experience and determined effective ways of fighting. As a result, during the night of December 20 to 21, the missile battalion recorded an outstanding feat: with 35 missiles, it downed seven B52s, five of which crashed on the spot. The anti-aircraft forces of Hà Nội, Hải Phòng, and Bắc Thái worked together under close coordination, shooting down seven tactical aircraft and one unmanned plane.

The enemy attack during the third night of the Linebacker II Operation suffered a heavy defeat. B52 pilots were seriously demoralized. On December 21, I issued the following directive to the Air Defence-Air Force: "Our victory was very great, we must strive to win even greater victories. The enemy would concentrate his attacks on missile emplacements. The missiles must be defended by every means possible to continue shooting down B52s." Attention was to be paid to ensuring the supply of missiles for the sake of continuous fighting. Efforts were to be made to promote the action of the air force against B52s. I also called directly on the divisions to commend the successful fighting of the Hà Nội anti-aircraft formation. I stated: "The whole country is turning to Hà Nội. The whole world is turning to Hà Nội. At every hour, every minute, the Politburo and the Central Military Committee dedicate themselves to the fight of Hà Nội. The destiny of the Motherland is in the hands of the air-defence combatants defending Hà Nội."

On the morning of December 21,1972, the Government of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam issued a statement strongly condemning the continuous acts of war committed by the Nixon

Administration. After reasserting the consequent stance of Việt Nam, the statement read: "Our people are deeply committed to peace, but this must be peace achieved toward genuine independence and freedom. We have enough good will and enough determination and strength to defend our sacred fundamental national rights. Let compatriots and fighters from all over our country enhance their heroism and unity by fighting for the independence and freedom of their Motherland. And for our lofty international duty, let us strive with all our forces to carry out the testament of beloved President Hồ Chí Minh. Let us persevere in, and step up, the fight on the three military, political and diplomatic fronts in order to liberate the South, defend and build the Socialist North, and advance toward national reunification and peace."

On the same day, the Statement of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Việt Nam was broadcast over the Liberation Radio: "Any blow dealt by the US aggressors against the North will draw from the Southern army and people a riposte five or ten times stronger!" The radio also broadcast a letter from Sài Gòn to Hà Nội: "As the fire of the North fans up the fire of the South, so the fire of Hà Nội stirs the fire of Sài Gòn. From the outside to the inside, from the brave rear positions to the heroic great frontline, an irrefutable answer resounds: Let us fight!"

This was a marvelous coordination on the military, public opinion and diplomatic fronts, between the great rear positions and the great frontline. The converging blows were aimed at the enemy in the overall strategy of the Vietnamese people's war.

Combat was fierce. The Headquarters worked with the utmost vigilance. The cipher service, military intelligence, combat operations, and information departments spent many sleepless nights. A serious shortage of missiles remained. Although assembly lines were working continuously day-in and day-out, there were still not enough missiles. Vehicles were waiting to carry to the missile emplacements those which were assembled. I regularly rang up the Command of the Hà Nội Air Defending Division to commend the records of the missile troops in downing B52s and to inquire about the fighting. I particularly emphasized

the need to assemble the missiles diligently and to use them only to fire at B52s.

The Military Information Agency of the Propaganda and Training Division (General Political Department) issued timely war bulletins. The Voice of Việt Nam Radio repeatedly broke into its regular broadcasts to announce victory reports.

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After ordering the bombing of Hà Nội on the US Congress's Christmas recess, Nixon went on vacation at Key Biscayne in Florida to avoid meeting US pressmen and mass media.

Nixon's brutal action overshadowed the Christmas holiday and angered human conscience. An unprecedentedly indignant wave of protest against the US surged up all over the world, including the USA itself. Leaders of Socialist countries issued strong condemnations of the new US acts of aggression, affirming their support for our people's fight. The Communist and Workers' Parties indignantly exposed the US crimes and called on all peoples to struggle for peace in Việt Nam. In every part of the world, millions of people took to the street to strongly condemn the odious crime of the White House. US Congressmen vehemently criticized Nixon for undertaking this escalation without having consulted the US Congress and people. On December 20, 1972, the *New York Times* warned that "the United States risked a return to a pattern of barbarity like in the Stone Age". The Nguyễn Văn Thiệu clique were the sole rejoicers over this development. According to an AP report of December 19, "a senior South Vietnamese official said that the resumed attack on the center of Hà Nội and Hải Phòng was designed to be an encouragement to us". This official went on to assert that "this showed that the United States would never abandon us", then proceeded to recall a statement of Thiệu in August 1972 begging the United States "to bomb out North Việt Nam". The French paper *L'Humanité* recalled that "during World War II, French traitors like Doriot did not dare to propose that the "allied powers" devastate Paris. And now Thiệu wished to see his country devastated by US bombs. What a shame!"

On the anniversary of the establishment of the Việt Nam People's Army on 22 December 1972, Phạm Văn Đồng[1], Văn Tiến Dũng and Phùng Thế Tài[2] visited the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force. The Prime Minister commended the troops and advised the cadres and combatants to reassert their resolve to fight, to foil the dark designs of the United States, and win even greater victories.

The Party Committees, the People's Committees, and the mass organizations in Hà Nội, Hải Phòng and other localities habitually sent delegations to visit troops in air-defence emplacements and present them with gifts.

At that time, the enemy concentrated its attacks on the emplacements of missiles, the main danger for US aircraft. His tactic was to use Srike rockets to detect radar and attack the Vietnamese positions.

On the morning of December 22, I visited the positions of Missile Battalion 77 at Chèm[3], which was in a heightened state of combat readiness. After hearing the report on the shooting down of B52s during the previous night, I entered the command vehicle and requested that Battalion Commander Đinh Thế Văn and the combat team make a report on the techniques and specific actions necessary for dealing with enemy aircraft. Shaking hands with each of them, I encouraged the combatants to seek effective ways of fighting and to shoot down more enemy B52s.

In another missile battalion, I was informed that the combatants were repairing weapons and equipment. Later, I learned that upon my arrival, the unit had received the order to stand combat ready. As they wanted to protect me, they fabricated this story. But I did not make any criticism. This reminded me of a previous occasion when, during a visit to an air-defence emplacement, I encountered enemy planes flying in. My car was driving on a dyke of the Đáy River, and so we stopped; I and the accompanying comrades lay down on the road by the side of the dyke. The enemy planes launched a few Srike

1. Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam.
2. Brigadier General, then Commander of the Vietnamese Air Force.
3. A locality about 7 km northwest of Hà Nội.

rockets against a nearby missile emplacement and flew off. We continued on our way. A few days later, some Western news agencies reported that I had been mortally wounded by bombs from B52s. Some French journalists came to our embassy in Paris and asked for my biography. Polish comrades and a number of Vietnamese embassies abroad sent telegrams home to seek information. Subsequently, I also learned that some comrades of ours, detained by the enemy, secretly organized a mourning for me in their jail. The Voice of Việt Nam Radio had to have a record of my speech on the occasion of the anniversary of the Việt Nam People's Army and to broadcast it as an indirect denial of my death.

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Wolf in lamb's clothing.

Nixon ordered a suspension of B52 bombing on Christmas Day in the framework of a deceptive manoeuvre. In fact, this was an attempt to breathe more freely and draw useful experience after sustaining blows on the international stage.

At the same time, highlighting our humane policy, the office for propaganda among enemy soldiers allowed the US pilots detained in the "Hilton Hotel"[1] to commemorate Christmas Day. The "pilots in pyjamas"[2] were allowed to make wall newspapers, organize singing festivals, welcome Santa Claus at the side of finely decorated Christmas trees, and to pray for peace and repatriation. The English broadcast of the Voice of Việt Nam, well-known to American Gls through the voice of "Hà Nội Hana",[3] broadcast the voice of Captain Glen Serten. The pilot of a B52G captured on the previous night announced to his wife that he was alive and receiving humane treatment. He also said that the Vietnamese

1. Ironic name given by Western newspapers to the detention places of US pilots captured in North Việt Nam. Hilton Hotel is the name of several famous five-star hotels in the United States.
2. The US prisoners of war wore pyjama-like clothes. A video from the German Democratic Republic of captured US pilots bears this name *(Pilots in Pyjamas)*.!
3. Woman broadcaster Thu Hương of the broadcast reserved for US troops. She was called by GIs "Hà Nội Hana".

people were not America's enemy, then expressed his hope that this odious war would soon come to an end.

Fierce carpet-bombing resumed immediately after Christmas. On the night of December 26, the United States mobilized hundreds of B52 sorties for savage attacks on populated areas inside Hà Nội. At times, the solid command post of the Army Headquarters shook like in an earthquake. At 22h47, B52s carpet-bombed Khâm Thiên Street, the most densely populated place in the capital-city, causing tremendous human and material losses. Along with Khâm Thiên, B52s also bombed over 100 other populated areas in the city. Casualties exceeded 1,000.

Availing themselves of each hour and minute, our fighters diligently replaced and repaired their weapons and equipment, replenished the ammunition stores, and stood ready to carry on the fight. Having steeled themselves through several days and nights of combat, Hà Nội ans often came out of their shelters to look at US planes burning in "the festival nights of crackers" (anti-aircraft fire).

At 22h30 on the night of December 26, Battalion 77 of Missile Regiment 257, in coordination with the anti-aircraft positions, turned two B52s into giant torches in the southern corner of the city with only 13 missiles. One of the planes crashed on the Tương Mai Restaurant in Hai Bà Trưng district (Hà Nội inner city). Standing on the ground outside the Army Headquarters, I was deeply moved to witness with my own eyes this majestic sight. Stepping inside, I rang up the Command of the Hà Nội Air Defence Forces. Hearing the familiar voice of the Deputy Commander, I told him:

- Good performance tonight. The Politburo, the Central Military Committee and the High Command warmly commend you! It is necessary to draw experience from this event and to secure missile forces for the sake of a protracted fight. What about the ammunitions?

Trần Nhẫn reported that a number of missiles had just been received from Zone IV. There was no more question of firing shot by shot. I felt relieved.

During the night of December 26 to 27, the Hà Nội people and troops seething with hatred shot down 18 enemy planes, including eight B52s. That was the night the United States lost the greatest number of B52s.

*

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Hà Nội, heroism, mourning.

Sharing the grief with our compatriots, Uncle Tôn[1] and I drove at once to Khâm Thiên Street and Bạch Mai Hospital. Trường Chinh[2] and Phạm Văn Đồng visited Bạch Mai Hospital and Gia Lâm ward. Amidst the ruins, our compatriots were moved to receive the solicitude of the Party and their State leaders. Everybody present promised to show determination turning sorrow into action and to compel the enemy to pay the debt of blood.

Under a barrage of US bombs and shells, the Vietnamese people held high their heads. Overcoming the thunderous explosions of bombs, the newspapers and the radio unceasingly announced news of victory.

The celebrated words of Uncle Hồ resounded as an oath: "Hà Nội, Hải Phòng and other cities and enterprises may be destroyed; but the Vietnamese people will not be intimidated! Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom. Once victory is won, our people will rebuild their country, and make it even more prosperous, more beautiful"[3].

In compliance with the directive of the High Command, Phùng Thế Tài, Deputy Chief of Staff, assumed direct command of the Air Force in the fight against B52s. On the night of December 27, Phạm Tuân, piloting a MIG21, launched a surprise take-off from Yên Bái Airfield and shot down a B52 in the northwest sky, disturbing the

1. Tôn Đức Thắng, then Chairman of the Council of State.
2. Then Chairman of the National Assembly's Standing Committee.
3. Hồ Chí Minh. *Complete Works*, 2nd edition. National Political Publishing House, Hà Nội, 1996, Vol. 12, p. 108.

enemy formation and enabling the Hà Nội air defence to destroy five more B52s.

Time passed in a heavy and tense atmosphere.

Over 12 successive days and nights, the United States called up about 200 B52 strategic aircraft and over 1,000 tactical planes of various types to strike at Hà Nội and Hải Phòng. More than 100,000 tons of bombs were dropped on schools, hospitals, populous streets... Crimes piled up.

In those days, although busy and in a tense mood, I did not forget to direct the Air Defence-Air Force Command to collect the electronic equipment and documents from the debris of downed B52s and F111s, and to learn from them how to improve our strategies for fighting against US strikes. Local people, too, took part however they could in this work. One day, my youngest son, who was evacuated to Hòa Bình, brought home a set of documents of the Command of the US Air Force. These materials marked the emplacements of our missile and anti-aircraft artillery along with bombing instructions, which had been handed to him by the population for conveyance. I carefully read these documents. On the cover was the following note: "Secret papers. Not to be removed from the Defence Ministry." Before delivering this document to the General Chief of Staff's Office, I wrote down these additional words: "With the exception of the Vietnamese Defence Ministry."

At 8h00 on December 28, I arrived at Battalion 79, Missile Regiment 257, in Yên Nghĩa, Hà Tây. The fighters greeted me in a state of high combat readiness, but also with a tremendous amount of warmth and cordiality.

The habitual time for enemy activities was near, I advised the unit to avoid subjectivity and conceit, to maintain secrecy, to keep well-camouflaged, to strike at the enemy but not fail to protect themselves, Analyzing their success, I commented:

- The men and their weapons remain the same, but this time you have made outstanding progress, Your formation is a modern one; consequently, you must grasp modern military techniques so as to be able to make technical improvements and develop good

coordination for fighting, With a strong combat organization and capable command, by promoting the offensive spirit, through cleverness and creativeness in battle, in defeating the enemy by night, by foiling all jamming tactics and successfully opposing their Srike rockets, we will attain even greater victories.

I want to explain how significant the enemy's defeats were:

- During World War II, given the anti-aircraft techniques of the time, the air force usually sustained 1% losses in the places where there were comparatively strong activities. During the war of destruction in Việt Nam, former US President Johnson admitted that the US losses amounted, generally speaking, to 1 %, but to 2% for Hà Nội and Hải Phòng.

What about now?

Up to this day, December 28, the Americans have lost 31 B52s. As they have 200 planes, the loss of 31 means a 15% loss. Let us consider Hà Nội and Hải Phòng separately. Seeing that they come each time with 20 or 30 planes, the loss of four or five planes represents a very high percentage! For the strategic air force, the loss of 10% to 15% of planes is a very high percentage. The substance of the enemy defeat lies in this fact!

Over the last few days, the US Government had to admit that their losses amounted to 8%. Of course, they did not dare tell the truth to the public.

After wishing the Battalion even greater victories, I asked:

- What will be the forthcoming percentage?

Somebody answered:

- 100%!

I said by way of a joke:

- It is to be remembered that while a missile can down a plane, a commando fighter can destroy 15 planes at a time. If you fight better, this is also possible!

Afterwards, I visited the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force formation located in the Trầm stone grotto.

In a jubilant atmosphere, Trần Hạnh reported that our Air Force shot down another B52 the previous night. Hearing this, I said:

- Congratulations to the Air Force for its military success. Surely, however, you are not content?

- Not yet. We must shoot down more B52s!

Cheers of agreement rose from the ranks.

I also received a report on the reconnaissance network of the radar formation, which was both very good and very Vietnamese. It was a dense, strong, closely coordinated network with radar stations located in unexpected terrain, combining modern and rudimentary materials, long-range radar with a system of visual observation posts around Hà Nội, closely controlling four levels of altitude: high, medium, low and very low, the whole of which can "strike on the face, at the flank and in the rear" as directed by Deputy Chief-of-Staff Vương Thừa Vũ during an inspection visit to the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force in June 1972. Thanks to this network, during the first night and on the following days, although the radar stations in the Delta were consistently jammed, the other stations in the northwest and northeast, in Vĩnh Linh, Đô Lương, Diễn Châu and even in the Plain of Jars (Laos), clearly detected formations of B52s thousands of kilometers from Hà Nội.

Talking with cadres at the Command Post, I told the story of my meeting with a woman near the debris of the B52 which was shot down over Ngọc Hà village. She held my hand and spoke emotionally:

-This is the first time I've met you, General. We do not fear these B52s! Not at all! And we will destroy all of them!

After commending the successes of the missile, radar, anti-aircraft units, and the air force, I undertook an analysis to elucidate the significance of victory:

-Your feat is outstanding. The enemy losses are extremely heavy. This is a loss in strategic air force. Dealing with the downing of a single B52, Western news agencies spoke about the loss of prestige to the US strategic air force. And now they have

lost no less than 32 planes. In addition, a lot of newly captured pilots are those who flew B52s and F111s, which the United States do not possess in great numbers. This must be clearly understood in order to rejoice, to gain greater confidence, and to win still bigger victories.

On behalf of the whole military formation, Colonel Commander Lê Văn Tri promised to carry out the directives of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, to strive to raise combat quality, overall combat capacity, and, together with the other armed forces units, to shoot down more planes and capture more enemy pilots.

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On December 22, the United States sent a note proposing a resumption of peace talks according to the content agreed upon in October 1972.

The AP bitterly recorded on December 25, 1972 that "US losses were the heaviest since the start of the bombardment of North Việt Nam in September 1964".

On the night of December 28,1972, I approved the victory communique drafted by the Propaganda and Training Department.

"... In only 12 days and nights, our army and people have:

1. Shot down 77 modern planes belonging to the US Strategic and Tactical Air Force, most of which crashed on the spot. This figure includes:

- 33 B52 strategic aircraft, mostly B52D and B52G planes, strategically endowed with modern electronic equipment.

- Five F111 planes.

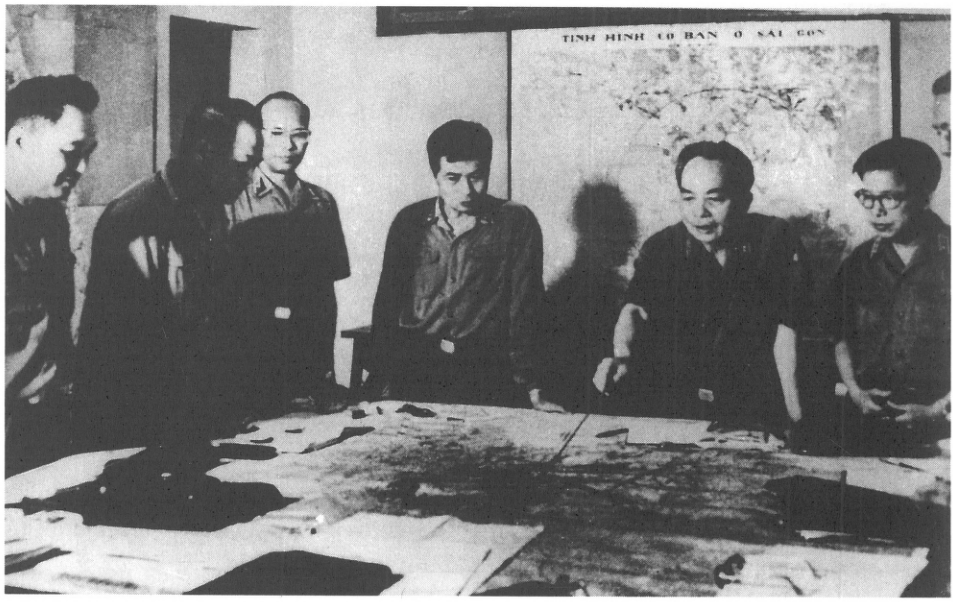
- 24 modern US Navy jet planes.

- Three reconnaissance planes and one helicopter[1].

1. According to the December 28, 1972 Communique of the Army High Command.

▲ The Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign

▲ Supplies to the Tây Nguyên Campaign




▲ The Central Military Committee follows the developments of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign

◀ Nguyễn Trung Kiên,
Sài Gòn special-task group

2. Killed or captured hundreds of US pilots, among whom were officers of various ranks, from lieutenant-colonel downwards.

3. Set afire eight US warships..."

"With joy and emotion", I added to the communique, "I warmly commend the various military formations of the main forces, local troops, armed people's security forces, militia, self-defence units and the compatriots in various northern localities who had closely coordinated their activities with the firm resolve to defeat the US aggressors, fought very well and recorded very big victories." I did not forget to call on the compatriots and fighters "to reassert their resolve to fight and to win victories, to launch resolute attacks, and to deal the US air and naval forces even stronger blows..."

Although it was already midnight, the communique was conveyed at once to the Việt Nam News Agency. The next morning, the full text of the communique of victory was carried on the first page of the newspapers and broadcast over the Voice of Việt Nam Radio right at the beginning of the news reports. The editorial of the *People's Army* newspaper praised this great military victory as "Điện Biên Phủ in the air", a name weighted and resounding with significance that was accepted by the Western press.

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The prestige of the US Air Force had collapsed. And immediately with it went the US hope to engage in talks from a position of strength.

Afterwards, Western publications revealed that Nixon had compelled Nguyễn Văn Thiệu to sign an agreement at any cost. Thiệu was virtually in despair when reading again and again Nixon's letter, delivered to him by General Haig.

"... I would like to stress in conclusion that General Haig does not come to Sài Gòn to negotiate with you... I am confident that your refusal to cooperate with us will lead to a disaster, the loss of all that we have been fighting for together in the past decade.

This will be impardonable because we will lose an honorable and fair settlement."

On January 17, 1973, six days before the signing of the Paris Agreement, Nixon sent another letter to Thiệu which sounded like an ultimatum:

"I have repeatedly answered you that the crucial problem here is not the special character of the Agreement and through it the promise of a long-term cooperation between the two countries and an aid from our part. Obviously, I have been acting for this aid. If you refuse to sign the agreement, you cannot expect anything from our possible assistance. The views expressed in the Congress and in public opinion do not allow me to do otherwise."[1]

This was always a problem of "the carrot and the stick". If one prove ineffective, the other will be resorted to. And of course, Thiệu must surrender .

Kissinger returned to the Conference table without getting anything more. At noon on January 23, 1973, amidst a fine drizzle in the icy cold, he arrived at Kleber Avenue to initial the draft agreement. Four days later, the Paris Agreement on Việt Nam was formally signed. John Negroponte, one of Kissinger's assistants on Việt Nam, bitterly complained: "We have bombed North Việt Nam, and now we ourselves agree to make concessions."[2].

1. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jerold L. Schecter. *From the White House to the Independence Palace.* Vietnamese translation. Trẻ (Youth) Publishing House, Hồ Chí Minh City, 1990, p. 213.
1. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jerold L. Schecter. Op. cit, p. 214.

*Chapter II*

# THE HISTORIC CONFERENCE

1972 was a year marked by Vietnamese people in both zones recording great successes of strategic importance in many fields – military, political, diplomatic, production and defence of production.

In one year of heroic, staunch combat, our army and people on the great frontline put out of action nearly half a million enemy troops including eight divisions, 35 regiments, brigades and combat columns, which were altogether either annihilated or forced to sustain heavy losses. We destroyed or captured vast quantities of weapons and war materials, shot down or otherwise destroyed thousands of aircraft, sank hundreds of warships.

Our troops smashed three solid defence lines built up by the US-puppets during several years in Quảng Trị, northern Highlands, eastern Nam Bộ – their vital strategic operations in South Việt Nam. For the first time, many puppet divisions and regiments, the backbone of the "Vietnamization strategy", were wiped out or disintegrated in spite of the coordinated action of the US air and naval forces. The basis of the "Vietnamization strategy" – the "rural pacification" plan - sustained a serious defeat.

Through continuous attacks and uprisings, the South Vietnamese army and people dealt telling blows at the enemy's coercive yoke, liberated many district centers and military sectors, and swept away big chunks of military posts and strategic hamlets.

During strategic offensive in 1972, although there was no political strike in urban areas, millions of people seized the right of mastership. The liberated zone was broadened; the base areas of the three Indochinese countries were linked together into an integrated chain, creating a very effective strategic position both for

the immediate- and the long-term. Revolutionary authority was built up and consolidated, while armed forces developed and secured a firm stronghold. The elan of struggle in Sài Gòn and southern urban areas was restored.

The strategic transport in support of the South Vietnamese battlefield was stepped up. In spite of harsh weather conditions and fierce enemy air attacks, transport operations in great number and volume were carried on day and night. Our army and people foiled the enemy's strategic policy of resumed air and naval strikes in South Việt Nam as well as escalated destruction in North Việt Nam. In particular, the 12 days and nights of fighting which resulted in the downing of 33 B52s in late 1972 were an outstanding feat. For the first time, Việt Nam successfully carried out a large-scale air-defence campaign, defeated the US strategic air force in a resounding battle, and inflicted upon the US air forces the heaviest losses in their history.

Overcoming the US blockade, North Việt Nam maintained and developed its communications and transport, while protecting and stepping up its production in fierce war conditions. On the agricultural front, two consecutive good crops were harvested. Several provinces enjoyed yields of five or six tons of rice per hectare.

On January 12, 1973, the heroism of grand ceremony was held in Hà Nội to confer a title glorifying various units, cadres and fighters of the Air Defence-Air Force.

Trường Chinh, Chairman of the National Assembly's Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Party Central Committee and the State, publicly announced President Tôn Đức Thắng's awarding order. Then, on behalf of the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command, I congratulated 24 units and 12 cadres and combatants who were just awarded the lofty title of Hero of the People's Armed Forces.

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The Paris Agreement was signed during the Tết Festival of the Lunar New Year. Under it, on January 28, 1973, the cease-fire came

into effect. The place where gun explosions stopped would be a demarcation line between the two sides.

On the night of Januany 27, the "hinge" night, the puppet army impudently opened fire at our troops' positions in Cửa Việt (Quảng Trị) with all its guns on land and on warships. Availing itself of the artillery shelling, it used over 200 tanks and armored vehicles, and Marine Brigade 147 from Mỹ Thủy, Gia Đẳng to occupy the harbor. In a single night, it came to occupy an area it had been unable to reconquer over several previous months.

With the loss of Cửa Việt, Đông Hà, Dốc Miếu and Quán Ngang were directly threatened. The Trường Sơn strategic line of transport was in position to be menaced. The outcome of the 1972 Quảng Trị Campaign was seriously compromised.

Lê Trọng Tấn, Commander of the 1972 Campaign, phoned to Cường, the Cửa Việt Commander:

- Do you know that the Cửa Việt harbor has been lost?

- They have encroached on some lands. We have sent somebody to meet the Brigade Commander to raise a protest.

Tấn gave an order in a harsh tone:

- They used a whole tank brigade and a marine brigade to occupy the Cửa Việt harbor not to hear your protest! I order you to reoccupy the harbor at once! Clear?

- Yes!

- Then comply at once with this order. Why are you concerned only about whether we will be considered as violators of the Agreement without seeing that the enemy side has actually done away with it?

Tấn requested the opinion of the High Command by telephone. I gave my agreement and added:

- Retake the position at once. Send there the strongest sons of Đào Huy Vũ! Reconquer the position at any cost!

- Clear! You have my word! I will send the whole Huy Vũ family to rejoice with Đào Dũng and Cường. Don't worry. The party will be very merry[1].

Subsequently, Tấn ordered Tank Brigade 203 and the artillery to launch coordinated attacks. He also ordered the various divisions to select nine anti-tank teams. Cao Văn Khánh and Doãn Tuế, the Deputy Commanders, were to take direct command.

At dawn on January 28, 1973, under the pretext of replacing troops as the enemy had done on the previous day, we sent a formation to get close to the enemy vehicles and then suddenly open fire. The brigade commander was killed at the very outset. The battle had ended by noon. The enemy had fled in panic, leaving behind over 100 vehicles and many dead bodies.

The news of victory was reported.

I took the telephone, commended our troops on their feat and praised the resolve and vigilance of the Command of the Quảng Trị Campaign.

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By early 1973, the situation in South Việt Nam was seething. The US-puppets sabotaged the Paris Agreement, stepped up pacification and encroachment operations, and carried on the "Vietnamization war" strategy. Availing themselves of the cease-fire provisions, they launched encroachment operations meant to be a "final round". They carried out a "special pacification" plan, reoccupied our "enclaves", encroached on border areas, threatened the transport corridor, drove out our main forces, implemented an "administrative revolution", consolidated the hamlet and communal coercion apparatus, stepped up psychological warfare,

1. Code language used in telephone conversations. The idea was: tanks and armored units must be used. Đào Huy Vũ was at that time the Commander of the tank and armored formation. 'To rejoice" means to launch coordinated attacks. "The strongest sons" were T54 tanks that were much feared by puppet troops. Đào Dũng was the Commander of the defence forces of Cửa Việt.

distorted the Paris Agreement, organized "Phượng hoàng" (Phoenix) campaigns, and undertook intensive intelligence and commando activities against our bases in South Việt Nam.

At the daily briefings in the Chief of Staff's Office, reports were flowing in. The enemy had carried out mopping-up and encroachment operations within the liberated zone. They paid particular attention to peripheral key areas, such as the western part of Quảng Trị- Thừa Thiên; the southwestern part of Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng; Quảng Ngãi; the northern part of Bình Định; the western part of Kon Tum; the confines of the liberated zone and the middle areas north and northwest of Sài Gòn; the area south and north of Highway 4; between Mỹ Tho, Vĩnh Long and Chương Thiện; and the border area of Kiến Tường and Châu Đốc. They used two-thirds of their main forces in coordination with civil guards to launch operations involving one or two regiments to encroach on our "enclaves", and one or more divisions against Cửa Việt, Sa Huỳnh (Quảng Ngãi), northern Kon Turn, Tây Ninh, Tân Châu, Hồng Ngự, Cai Lậy, Chương Thiện, etc. Artillery shelling and air strikes, although reduced, remained fierce. Encroachment attacks, annihilation strikes, and population displacement were carried out to disrupt our bases. With brutal and perfidious tactics, the enemy succeeded in encroaching on a substantial part of the confining areas, our "enclaves" in Zone V[1], a number of remote areas in Zone VIII[2], while improving his peripheral defence in Quảng Trị- Thừa Thiên, Quảng Đà, Quảng Tín, western Kon Tum and the provinces along the Việt Nam-Cambodia border, seizing control over more lands and populations, thereby causing us many difficulties. In western Nam Bộ, due to our timely ripostes, the enemy failed in their encroachment attempts and in the process sustained heavy losses.

In the context of history, it was not easy to recognize the perfidious schemes of the US-puppets. Some people thought that the priority then was to preserve peace, achieve national concord, create stability for about five or ten years. Some localities, due to

1. Comprising Quảng Nam, Đà Nẵng, Quảng Ngãi, Bình Định, Phú Yên, and Khánh Hòa.
2. Comprising the provinces south of Highway 4 such as Long An, Đồng Tháp, Kiên Giang, and Hà Tiên.

lack of vigilance, lost land and people. In other places, people backed the pursuit of a clear-cut demarcation with the enemy and to do away with the "leopard-skin" situation. In some areas, main force divisions were entrusted with the task of defending base areas while local forces fought against enemy encroachment. There was a simplistic view that the flames of war had been extinguished. There were also plans to use the US$ 3.5 billion promised by the US side as war reparations as an initial accumulation fund. Even at the Headquarters there was an unwillingness to fight back for fear of violating the Paris Agreement.

I remember an afternoon in Đồ Sơn, when I heard Lê Hữu Đức and Võ Quang Hồ, Head and Deputy Head of the Combat Operations Department respectively, announce that the proposal to initiate guerilla warfare in opposition to the enemy's encroachments on the liberated areas had not yet been accepted. I responded: "As you are used to work in military science, you like to use words. Why don't you say: the enemy carries out mopping-up operations to retake areas newly liberated by us; he occupies more posts. Will we fight back or allow the loss of everything?" Things became clear then.

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Peace was restored.

The greatest victory lay in the fact that in the South we had "a viable political network", troops, land, people, and recognition by international law. US troops had been compelled to pullout while our army remained.

The Politburo advocated a rapid consolidation of the liberated areas. The immediate and long-term material and technical requirements of our troops in the South were very great. I discussed the matter with Đinh Đức Thiện, Head of the General Department of Logistics.

In light of these problems, I took the position that the obstinacy of the US-puppets would result in the enemy directing its strikes at

the Trường Sơn strategic supply roads, or at least try to cause us difficulties by requesting the stationing of international control posts at important communication junctions on the strategic transport road. We needed to avail ourselves of the temporary suspension of enemy strikes to increase transport operations to the South. In addition to foodstuffs and medicine, it was necessary to bring in heavy weapons such as tanks, armored vehicles, heavy guns, anti-aircraft guns, and technical materials.

I directed Đồng Sĩ Nguyên to overcome these logistical difficulties and open an eastern Trường Sơn road from Khe Gát (Quảng Bình) to Bù Gia Mập (Nam Bộ) for the purpose of quick and convenient strategic transport.

A few days later, Thiện submitted to the Military Committee a comprehensive plan of transport and supply for the South. He proposed to lead a fairly numerous group of cadres to the battlefield, where they would organize the plan's implementation.

"How many people do you require, and how do you intend to utilize them?" I asked him.

"I need about 100 cadres," Thiện replied, "including men of the logistics branch and also of various branches of the armed services. Wherever I go, I will carry out organization work, oversee efforts at building up the liberated areas, logistics bases with storehouses, military health stations, technical installations, and production units."

I felt that the plan was both big and rash, yet at the same time reasonable and necessary. So, I immediately gave my approval.

Thiện's plan was ratified by the Military Committee. The group of cadres soon set out for the South, joined by Tố Hữu. Renowned for his dynamism and daring, Thiện promptly completed a very important task and made a positive contribution to the consolidation of the liberated zone. Together with Corps 559, he transported to various battlefields tens of thousands of tons of materials and technical equipment, including food supplies, clothing, medicines, weapons, heavy guns, anti-aircraft guns, tanks, and armored vehicles, thereby ensuring improvements in the strength and training

of the armed forces, increased combat capacity, and the successful transport of many necessary supplies for the population.

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The "Điện Biên Phủ in the air" victory, after eight years of fighting against the US, marked a prodigious leap forward for our army and people, and in particular the Air Defence-Air Force. I devoted a lot of time together with the leaders of this military formation to employ effectively the precious experience we had drawn from during the past years in our efforts to cope with new schemes and tactics of the enemy.

In Đồ Sơn, a report was given by the Command of the Air Defence-Air Force on the training and fighting of each arm of the services – missiles, anti-aircraft artillery, radar and air force. The reports had been carefully prepared with reference to intelligence sources and documents from Great Britain, Germany, Japan, and the US. A study on the air war in Indochina concluded that the Vietnamese victory was an unparalleled example of victory of human intelligence over machines. Problems relating to organization, combat, cadre training, and technical equipment were raised, and lightened further the contents of the policies which were being discussed by the Military Committee.

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In early March 1973, the Central Military Committee held a meeting attended by Generals Văn Tiến Dũng, Song Hào, Lê Quang Đạo, Đinh Đức Thiện, and Trần Quý Hai.

In my opening statement, I focused on the need to correctly assess the situation in South Việt Nam from military, political, economic, and diplomatic angles. It would be crucial for us to adopt a comprehensive policy to thwarf the enemy's schemes and manoeuvres of land encroachment, population control and destruction of revolutionary bases.

After hearing Lê Trọng Tấn's report, the Committee held lively discussions in which each member reevaluated elements of his own learning, mental discipline, and leadership performance, then offered criticism of the Military Committee and the Army High Command's functioning.

At the end of the meeting, the Military Committee decided that, while the enemy was fighting us militarily, we needed to closely combine our own military and political struggles with the legal provisions contained in the Paris Agreement. Gradually, we would take offensive by political means and with the support of the armed forces, and thereby achieve a cease-fire, with peace restored and advantage gained.

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Hostilities in South Việt Nam went through complex developments; many points needed to be examined on the spot. I went into the field for direct discussions with various battlefields: B5 (Quảng Trị), B4 (Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên), Command 559 and Military Zone IV. The realities on the fire line showed even more clearly the enemy's schemes and tricks to sabotage the Paris Agreement, putting us in the position to resolve these new problems as quickly as possible. Working with Lê Trọng Tấn, Song Hào, Cao Văn Khánh, Vũ Xuân Chiêm, Đồng Sĩ Nguyên, Hoàng Thế Thiện, Đàm Quang Trung, Nguyễn Văn Thanh, Phan Văn Đường[1], and the Standing Committee of the Quảng Bình Provincial Party Committee, we discussed in detail how we would consolidate the positions of our forces, oppose the puppet army's encroachment attempts, carry out measures to increase the forces of B4 and B5, construct roads for motorized vehicles, open

1. At the time, Lê Trọng Tấn was Commander of the Quảng Trị Campaign, Song Hào was Political Commissar, and Cao Văn Khánh was Deputy Commander. Đồng Sĩ Nguyên and Hoàng Thế Thiện were respectively Commander and Political Commissar of Corps 559. Vũ Xuân Chiêm was Deputy Head of the General Department of Logistics. Đàm Quang Trung and Phan Văn Đường were respectively Commander and Deputy Political Commissar of Military Zone IV. Nguyễn Văn Thanh (alias Thanh Quảng) was Deputy Political Commissar of the Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên Front.

the eastern Trường Sơn road, step up strategic transport including air transport, fortify the base area, solve logistical problems and remove our wounded safely from the battlefields. The survey tour of the Trường Sơn road left me profoundly impressed by the heroism and endurance of the cadres and fighters of Corps 559 and their will to overcome difficulties.

Talking with the cadres and fighters of Corps 559, I gave them the following advice: If we were to reach the apex of complete victory, we would have to show our enemy even greater gallantry, cleverness and creativeness. The Trường Sơn road, I told them, must be broadened for two-way motor traffic, even during the first months of the rainy season. An idea occurred to me about the great possibilities of the strategic road bearing Uncle Hồ's name in future national construction as well.

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Sixty days had elapsed since the Paris Agreement was enacted. On the morning of March 27, 1973, the Politburo held an unusually large meeting. After hearing Lê Quang Đạo's report on the situation, Foreign Minister Nguyễn Duy Trinh suggested that we strive to create a position of strength for ourselves, working out specific counter-measures to compel the United States to end its involvement and to force the puppets to end their hostilities. He also spoke about world public opinion and praise for our victories.

First Secretary Lê Duẩn proceeded to enumerate the content for our discussions, which included a distribution of work between the Politburo and the Central Board for South Việt Nam in giving guidance to our delegations at the four-party and two-party conferences, an examination of our policy with regard to the United States, a recapitulation of the past 60 days of Agreement implementation and the issuance of a Government statement. Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Lê Đức Thọ took the floor to assess the situation. They made suggestions on the orientation of our policy vis-â-vis the United States, and the methods we would follow to improve them.

◂ Nguyễn Trung Kiên, Sài Gòn special-task group, guides our troops to liberate Sài Gòn

▸ Lawyer Ngô Bá Thành (Phạm Thị Thanh Vân), former chairperson of the Movement for Women's Right to Live at the time of the Sài Gòn regime, welcomes the liberation troops and the revolutionary administration

◂ Sài Gòn people flock to the Độc Lập Palace to welcome the liberation army

◂ Dương Văn Minh, the last President of the Sài Gòn regime, is permitted to enjoy the freedom of a citizen of an independent country

The Sài Gòn people welcome the liberation troops ▾

US military staff flee Sài Gòn by helicopter on April 28 and 29, 1975 ▾

▸ Lê Văn Thức, sentenced to death and jailed on Côn Đảo island for over ten years, in an emotional meeting with his mother on the liberation day

In conclusion, Lê Duẩn expressed his agreement to allow the Central Board to exercise direct control over joint military commissions while the Central Military Committee would oversee military problems. He asserted that the United States had withdrawn its troops but not ended its involvement; the puppets still obdurately tried to sabotage the Agreement. We needed to strive to build up forces in the South and the North, to bring back into the fold the responsibility of the United States, and to compel the other side to implement the Paris Agreement.

On the following day, March 28, unfolding the implementation of the Politburo's resolution, the Central Military Committee discussed the combat policy. The meeting concluded that although US troops had withdrawn, US military forces remained in the area: in northeast Thailand, Guam, the Philippines, and on the Fleet N$^{0}$7. Furthermore, the United States was supplying massive aid to strengthen the puppet army in an attempt to counter the revolution and turn South Việt Nam into a dependence of the United States where only an army and an administration existed. Combat operations, now aimed at the puppet army, were oriented in the South to combine the operations of the regular army with guerilla warfare units, military operations and propaganda within enemy forces, fighting with force building, and the annihilation of the enemy with the endeavor to win over the southern population and build up people's bases. The meeting also added to the military tasks of the North the combination of economic construction with national defence and the dispatch of increased aid to the South and military issues in Laos and Cambodia.

Immediately after the meeting, the Central Military Committee sent a telegram to the various battlefields, making clear that our military actions were to include initiating attacks and counterattacks, not merely defensive actions. Not only did we counterattack where the enemy attacked us, but we also took coordinated actions with political and military forces and agitators acting among enemy troops in places where our main forces were strong. We not only counterattacked with infantry and fire power, but also paid particular attention to the use of well-trained special commandos in striking enemy command

posts, storehouses, airfields, bases, and in other places where he was caught unaware.

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On March 29, 1973, the US military command in Sài Gòn held a "roll-down-the-flag" ceremony. On our beloved land, the foreign aggressors were swept away in the main.

After the signing of the Paris Agreement, more convenient conditions were created for liaisons between zones. Exchanges of information increased, became quicker, fuller, and richer through sources supplied from the battlefield, the Joint Military Commission, and newspapers, among others. Travelling. became easier, too, including that by air to Tân Sơn Nhất Airport.

Reports to the Headquarters were received and carefully analyzed. Cadres returning from the South submitted valuable information as well as various and useful perspectives.

The Politburo and the Central Military Committee paid much attention to the enemy's sabotage of the Paris Agreement. Given my responsibilities and the functions of my command, I labored over the situation and carried out additional discussions with many comrades.

I often invited comrades returning from the South to cordial dinners at my home. The discussions we had in such meetings were useful, indeed. After various discussions, First Secretary Lê Duẩn fully agreed with the decision to launch resolute attacks and carry out strong ripostes against the enemy. In telegrams to the South Việt Nam Central Board, the Party Committees for Zone V, Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên, and the Highlands, our revolutionary offensive spirit was reemphasized and initial changes to be brought about on the battlefield were explained.

I devoted a whole day to hear Tố Hữu talk about the situation in South Việt Nam after his "one-thousand-mile trip across the country"[1]. Being both a politician and a poet, he recounted what he

1. Title of a poem written by Tố Hữu following that trip.

witnessed along the Trường Sơn paths "where there is sunshine on the east side and rain in the west". He gave poetic expression to the aspirations of the Southern people and combatants:

*..."The distance is not long; but*

*it takes many days to go to and from Sài Gòn..."*

I thought to myself: with the offensive revolutionary spirit of our Party, the path to Sài Gòn will surely be shortened.

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Particularly useful to us were the working sessions in April 1973, attended by the leaders and commanders of various battlefields in South Việt Nam who convened with us in the North by order of the Party's Politburo. The B2 group of cadres led by Mười Cúc[1], Deputy Secretary of the Central Board, included Hoàng Văn Thái, Commander of B2, Võ Văn Kiệt, Secretary of the Party Committee for Zone IX, Trần Nam Trung, responsible for the eastern provinces of Nam Bộ, and Nguyễn Minh Đường, Secretary of the Party Committee for Zone VIII. The delegation of Zone V and the Central Highlands included Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân. On April 19, after arriving at the Hồ Tây (West Lake) Guest House in Hà Nội, the delegation made a preliminary report to the Politburo on the situation of the revolution in the South since 1972, with a special focus on the aftermath of the signing of the Paris Agreement.

On May 3, 1973, the Standing Board of the Central Military Committee held a working session with members of the Zonal Military Committee: Hoàng Văn Thái, Trần Văn Trà, Trần Lương, Nguyễn Minh Đường, and Võ Văn Kiệt.

On behalf of the delegation, Hoàng Văn Thái reported on a series of great victories of strategic significance on the B2 battlefield. The significance of this report was duly affirmed by the delegation

1. Nguyễn Văn Linh, former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Việt Nam (1986-1991).

members. Hoàng Văn Thái asserted there was a relationship between these victories and the early decision made by the Central Committee and the Central Military Committee with regard to correct combat orientation, with special note for the guidance provided on how to fight the enemy's "pacification" campaign.

However, owing to the relations of forces between the enemy and ourselves, these victories had been limited. Whereas the enemy retained strong sides, we had shortcomings and weaknesses which could not immediately be overcome. Our "opportunity plan"[1] recorded initial successes, but not sustained ones. The population under constraint could not break away. The enemy possessed military and technical superiority over us. This was especially true in the B2 sector, where the balance of forces was 2.5:1 in our enemy's favor.

The enemy's reactionary and obdurate character was clear. It would be difficult to establish a tripartite coalition government, and to achieve peace and national unity. The enemy was carrying out an extremely brutal and perfidious "pacification" plan code-named AB148 under the signboard of "rural reconstruction" In essence, it was aimed at eliminating the revolutionary bases, controlling the masses, encroaching on the liberated zone, doing away with contested areas, eliminating the "leopard-skin" pattern, and terrorizing resistant citizens. An intense psychological warfare campaign was commenced, the revolution was slandered, and the Paris Agreement distorted in an attempt to further the above scheme.

Sáu Dân[2], leader of Zone IX battlefield, took the floor after Hoàng Văn Thái. He pointed out the need and the possibility to maintain control of the main areas of Western Nam Bộ. He also spoke of the possibility of expanding the liberated areas in Zone IX to include 1.8 million inhabitants as suggested by the Zonal Party Committee.

1. From late 1972 until early 1973, the High Command directed various sectors in South Việt Nam to launch strong attacks. In the course of these, hundreds of enemy posts were annihilated or compelled to surrender or to withdraw, and the control over important areas was seized. This plan was code-named "Opportunity Plan".
2. Võ Văn Kiệt, former Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam.

Sáu Đường (Nguyễn Minh Đường) reported about the situation in Zone VIII and the relationship between Zones VIII and IX with regard to military and political activities, agitation among enemy troops, ripostes to enemy attacks, the defence of the lands, the gaining of crossingover population between sides, and the development of our revolutionary forces.

Hoàng Văn Thái also reported to the Military Committee the content of his recent discussions with the Party's First Secretary who explained the possible military developments in the South. Obviously, since the signing of the Paris Agreement, the war in South Việt Nam was developing differently than in the past, and peace was not actually restored. Accordingly, it was necessary to constantly bear in mind our views toward, and commitment to violent revolution and the offensive strategic spirit. We saw that we had to actively build up revolutionary forces, step up our attacks in the military, as well as in political, jurisdical and diplomatic spheres. It was also necessary to take into account the peculiar features of each locality in deciding which form of attack to employ in order to foil the pacification and land encroachment plans of the enemy, while simultaneously preserving land, gaining additional crossover population, and expanding the scope of our control.

Closing the discussion, I made a number of suggestions for the other comrades to ponder over in preparation of the May meeting of the Politburo. The biggest problem that I saw was the disparity of forces between ourselves and the enemy following the US withdrawal. If it was five to one (in favor of the enemy) in 1963-1964, then four to one in 1967-1968, what was it now? To get a clear sense of this, we had to consider various aspects of troop quality and quantity, material and spiritual strength, and the prevailing domestic and international attitudes on the war. Were we now stronger than the enemy?

With regard to the orientation and steps of struggle, how were we to develop the "two steps and three thrusts" of struggle in the new juncture? With the additional jurisdiction of the Paris Agreement, how were we to wage a struggle toward a successful outcome? In the realm of force building, in addition to the assistance of our strong rear positions, it was necessary that we

mobilize the on-the-spot possibilities of B2 to develop local armed forces, militias and guerillas to cope with any eventuality. In view of the impossibility to maintain a stalemate position, new steps were to be taken to strengthen our movement both in rural and urban areas.

Our working sessions were designed to provide us with more clarity on our situation, and afterward to effect viable policies. No conclusions were reached, but we achieved, in general, a concurrence of views on many issues.

Additional information immediately flowed in. On meeting Trần Văn Trà[1], who had recently come to Hà Nội, I received more information on the schemes, attitudes and tricks that the other side employed on the battlefield as well as at the Camp David negotiating table in Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield. Trà informed me that right after the signing of the Paris Agreement, the enemy ordered planes to bomb Thiện Ngôn Airfield at the exact time we had arranged for the military delegation of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Việt Nam to fly back to Sài Gòn. Thanks to its wisdom and vigilance, our delegation remained safe. One might regard this as our first victory in the face of the vile US-puppet's bad faith.

Fighting at close range with the enemy, Trần Văn Trà was able to report profound disparities between our forces and those of the enemy. Judging from a number of apparent indications, along with their truculent military actions and dark designs, the US-puppets could not be regarded as stronger than before the US withdrawal.

By virtue of additional weapons and war supplies recently brought in by the United States, the puppet troops had increased their firepower. They possessed more M48 tanks, long-range 175-mm rifles, and F5E attack planes. They increased their mobile combat security intergroups and combat police battalions, while their security guards and civil defence forces also grew in number.

1. Head of the military delegation of the Republic of South Việt Nam to the Four-Party Joint Military Commission.

Every effort was made to consolidate the puppet administration from central to local echelons, impose harsh constraints on the population, decimate revolutionary bases, and encroach further on the liberated zone.

Standing behind them in support were US mobile military forces stationed in Thailand and the Philippines, including four aircraft carriers, 855 tactical aircraft, and 173 B52 strategic planes.

At that time, our side encountered numerous difficulties. After protracted conflict from April 1972 to early 1973, every unit suffered depleted military strength. Food supplies and ammunitions were in short supply. Soldiers' health had declined. The subjective difficulties caused, to no small extent, a want of rest, and illusions were entertained about the enemy's goodwill. Some areas feared accusations of violating the Agreement if ripostes were launched against the enemy. Already, five prohibitions had been set forth: 1) a prohibition against attacking the enemy; 2) a prohibition to fight back at enemy encroachments; 3) a prohibition to encircle enemy posts; 4) a prohibition to shell enemy positions; 5) and a prohibition to build combat communes.

A dear price had to be paid for all right wing and illusory manifestations.

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The situation became increasingly clear for us.

On May 24, 1973, the Politburo held an expanded session to discuss the South Vietnamese problem. The meeting had been carefully prepared for a month. Attendees included Mười Cúc, Mười Khang[1], Năm Công[2], Hai Mạnh[3], Trần Lương, Sáu Dân, Sáu

1. Hoàng Văn Thái.
2. Võ Chí Công, former Chairman of the Council of State.
3. Chu Huy Mân.

Đường[1], Trần Hữu Dực[2], Song Hào[3], Trần Quý Hai[4], Lê Trọng Tấn[5], and Hoàng Minh Thảo[6]. The report drafted by the Central Military Committee and the Party Central Committee's Office had been forwarded to every participant prior to this session.

First Secretary Lê Duẩn opened the session by reviewing developments of the revolution in South Việt Nam over the past 18 years. He analyzed the global strategy of the US imperialists with regard to South Việt Nam. He explained that the main contradiction of the epoch was now concentrated in Việt Nam. Our country was standing on the front line of the national liberation movement. Lê Duẩn invoked the great victory of the Paris Agreement on Việt Nam and commended our glorious military successes in both zones. He asserted the soundness of the creative, sovereign revolutionary line of the Party in the context of both the enemy's perfidy and the complex international situation. He also pointed out tasks to be undertaken at once, including the fight against enemy encroachment, gaining crossover population, propaganda within enemy troops, frontline work, diplomatic work, building up the administrative powers of base areas, and strengthening the Party's leadership. He suggested that the conference carry out a study of the balance of forces, our strong and weak points, our increasingly advantageous position, and the enemy's rapid deterioration. He concluded: "We are enjoying new and favorable conditions. The revolution must march forward through the path of violence. By doing so, we are sure to win victory."

Mười Cúc and Trần Văn Trà reported on the situation in B2, the lair of the US-puppets. Năm Công made a report on the southern Trung Bộ battlefield. Sáu Dân and Sáu Đường pointed out the all-round situation in Zones VIII and IX. A full and clear picture of the South Vietnamese battlefield emerged and directed the attention of the leadership at vital angles. Representatives from the battlefields concurred with the assessments and resultant policies of the Politburo.

1. Nguyễn Minh Đường.
2. Former Deputy Prime Minister.
3, 4, 5, 6. Generals of the Việt Nam People's Army.

When the Politburo members took the floor, Trường Chinh immediately stressed the great victories recorded; but he also delineated the limitations of the generalized offensives and uprisings of the Tết Mậu Thân Festival (1968). Referring to the current situation, he explained that it was necessary for us to draw from past experiences, to show great flexibility in our leadership against the struggle, to avoid rigidity, especially while the war dragged on under such complicated and harsh conditions.

Phạm Văn Đồng and Nguyễn Duy Trinh reemphasized that we had recorded great victories, but only to a limited extent. They presented an analysis of neo-colonialism in South Việt Nam and other US-puppet schemes. They asserted that the United States had been weakened. To win victory, they said, we must use force and violence. It was correct to wage parallel military and political struggles, but at that time, the military struggle must be the pillar and a support for the political struggle.

The most lively discussions concerned the balance of forces between the enemy and ourselves. Were we the stronger side or was it the enemy? Generally speaking, it was easy to reach agreement, but when making comparisons between potential and real strength, as well as the quantity and quality of forces, the views diverged among comrades who had direct command on the battlefields.

I clearly remember Trần Hữu Dực's report on the Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên battlefield, an area at the heart of the conflict. Trần Hữu Dực had just been ordered by the Central Committee to B4 to study new developments. He pointed out that the zones in B4 were clearly demarcated: areas from the railway line to the sea were under enemy control, while those west of the railway were ours. Our troops had pulled back to our zone for the sake of consolidation. During the meeting, many comrades disagreed with such a dangerous way of proceeding. Obviously, it was no simple matter to decide on a course of action. A minor miscalculation might result in catastrophe.

I took the floor to deal with the main points in the report drafted by the Central Military Committee and the Central Committee's Office. In particular, I spoke in greater depth on the

new schemes and tricks of the US-puppets in the context of Vietnamizing the war. On the basis of enemy materials collected by the Second Frontline Department[1], I made it clear that as the United States was waging a neo-colonialist war of aggression, it had to use the puppet army and administration as a prop. The strength or weakness of the puppets would exert an effect of decisive significance on the entire situation of the war. For this reason, the United States was making every effort to bolster their puppet army and administration, sabotage the Agreement, and secure a broadly advantageous position. However, facing our army and people, they had insurmountable difficulties with which to contend. During the initial period of Nixon's attempt to Vietnamize the war, the puppet army, largely due to US firepower, remained standing. But once the US troops had completely withdrawn, it would disintegrate quickly if strongly attacked. The problem was to avoid illusions, to launch effective, organized struggles and counterattacks based on the experience of Military Zone IX, to break the enemy's wicked plans, and not allow them to consolidate their forces.

After a week of work, general agreement was reached by conference attendees as to why, since early 1973, the enemy had managed to initiate the majority of attacks, and why we had been compelled to cope with them passively, losing land and people in the process.

This was due to our shortcomings, not to the enemy's strength. Our initial failure to assess correctly his scheme and the manner in which he planned to implement it meant that we were unable to take a timely and consequential stand on the position and equipment to be used in the enemy's military attacks. The enemy had passed to the attack and launched encroachment operations while we had remained inactive and withdrawn our forces in some places. If things continued like this, the situation would render us tremendously disadvantaged.

1. Such as the urgent pacification plan from March to August 1973, the three-year pacification plan (1975-1977), the five-year plan for the building of the puppet army (1974-1979), the eight-year economic plan (1973-1980) for the reconstruction of South Việt Nam.

Based on the assessment that "the situation in South Việt Nam would pass through a period of instability, which might be comparatively long, and during which there would be no cease-fire, the acts of war would continue, there would not be actual peace, but this would not be all-out war, and South Việt Nam would have both peace and war", the Politburo advocated the following policy: "While the enemy resorts to military actions against us, we need to attack him through our own initiatives, combining our military, political, and jurisdical forces... To launch counterattacks will enable us to take the initiative; only by doing so will we foil, step by step, all enemy violations."

The resolution of the expanded May 1973 Politburo meeting had an immediate impact on our situation.

Nobody thought any longer in terms of respites or detentes. The combat, we realized, would drag on. Because the enemy carried on with its pacification, encroachment, and peace-sabotaging attempts, we had no choice but to defend our revolutionary gains, which had been earned at a great cost of blood. Moreover, we saw that we must promote our strong and hard-won position, mobilize the overall strength of the Vietnamese people's war behind our new and favorable conditions, and advance the revolution in South Việt Nam. It was not possible to halt mid-journey.

Văn Tiến Dũng and I engaged in a dialogue about jointly leading anew stage of preparation for military strategic plans. In April 1973, an organization called Central Team was set up to assist the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command in this work. The team comprised Head of the Combat Operation Department Vũ Lăng and Deputy Heads Võ Quang Hồ and Lê Hữu Đức; it was placed under the direct leadership of Lê Trọng Tấn, Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff[1]. In addition to routine work, the team met for two days every week at the office of Lê Trọng Tấn. With a spirit of diligence and seriousness, the

1. From early 1974, the team was placed under the direct guidance of Hoàng Văn Thái, First Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff.

Central Team completed, on June 6, 1973, a draft entitled "Strategic Plan" bearing codename 305 TG 1.

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The Party's strategies were disseminated across all battlefields.

The resolution of the Supreme Command was transformed into revolutionary action. Following half a year of fierce fighting, initial steps were taken to put in check the enemy's encroachment and "pacification" operations. Due to the intensive activities of our troops, the casualties of the puppet army exceeded 100,000. Quantities of weapons recently poured in by the United States fell into the hands of the Liberation Army.

The enemy shouted thief while engaging in acts of piracy.

On May 7, 1973, the Information and Press Department of our Foreign Ministry made public a *White Book* exposing US-Sài Gòn systematic violations of the Agreement centering on the cessation of hostilities and the restoration of peace in Việt Nam. The *White Book* made clear that the United States and the Sài Gòn Administration must bear full responsibility for this serious breach.

The Paris Agreement was threatened.

Lê Đức Thọ returned to the negotiating table.

Our position on the battlefield was akin to the position of our diplomats in facing the other side. Before departing, Lê Đức Thọ repeatedly exchanged views with me and Văn Tiến Dũng. Through Hồ Quang Hóa, Deputy Head of the Combat Operation Department and assistant of Lê Đức Thọ on military affairs, the Army High Command and the General Chief of Staff's Office regularly supplied information about the military situation as well as strategic assessments for our diplomats to reference.

Carrying out "Shuttle Diplomacy", Kissinger flew in and out between Washington and Paris, and between Paris and Sài Gòn to

try to save the situation. Nixon was obsessed by the Watergate affair which had recently been brought to light. The image of five men of the Republican Party caught in the act of intruding into the headquarters of the National Committee of the Democratic Party at the Watergate Building in June 1972 extinguished the glory of the US President's office. Nixon could not devote much time to the situation in Việt Nam, especially after the US troops' withdrawal and the return home of the US POW's. Still, though, he had to deal with Nguyễn Văn Thiệu who refused to accept the joint communique.

Letters and messages again flew to Sài Gòn. According to documents disclosed in 1989, Nixon had blatantly threatened Thiệu: "I would like to reassert that my sole wish was to strengthen my solidarity with you. I cannot believe that you will place me in a position compelling me to explain to the American people a reason for the collapse of the talks which would lead at once to the cutting of the budgets for Laos, Cambodia and finally Việt Nam".

Charles Whitehouse, the Special Envoy of the US President, brought with him to Sài Gòn messages conveying firmer terms.

"What you have to decide is to direct your representatives in Paris to join Dr. Kissinger in signing the communique in its present content notwithstanding the secondary doubts that you have expanded. Inversely, refusal to sign the agreement will bring about incaculably disastrous consequences for US Congress's support."

In his last letter, without diplomatic constraint, Nixon blatantly wrote:

"This is no longer an issue discussed between negotiators or lawyers or experts; now it is a problem directly involving ourselves. It is up to you to choose. Dr. Kissinger has been directed to return to Washington tomorrow afternoon. No dilatory or evasive attempt for any reason whatsoever will be accepted."[1]

There was no need to use the carrot, as the stick alone brought forth results.

1. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jerold L. Schecter. Op. cit.

Finally, two joint communiques concerned with the steps required to bring about strict and precise implementation of the Paris Agreement on Việt Nam were signed in a bitter atmosphere engendered by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

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The time had arrived for the Party Central Committee to act decisively on problems of basic strategy.

The situation had suddenly become much clearer.

The Politburo convened the 21st meeting of the Party Central Committee in June 1973 in order to promote the strategem of the Vietnamese revolution in the final stage of the war.

The collective of the Central Military Committee devoted efforts to ponder, study and exchange views. A number of cadres of the General Chief of Staff's Office, the General Political Department, and the General Department of Logistics were also mobilized under top-secret conditions. I pondered the strategic problems we faced in the final stage of the war. I was assisted by Deputy General Chiefs of Staff Lê Trọng Tấn and Cao Văn Khánh, two loyal and sincere companions-in-arms who had commanded major campaigns and been close to me for many years.

The first thing I thought of was to invite members of the B2 group to our working sessions.

With their combat practice and battlefield experience, the B2 group members forecasted that the enemy's pacification drive would soon be concentrated on the Mekong Delta. The primary tasks of B2 was to defeat the enemy's encroachment attacks; preserve the liberated zone, contested areas and enclaves in remote areas; contest the disputed areas; regain the support of the populations; open new areas of control while gradually liberating others whenever and wherever possible.

In order to achive the above, we had to strenghthen our forces, doubling them locally, ensure the combat strength of the main

forces, and increase the mobility and strike force of the army for offensive combat. Our target goal was to break through the enemy's regiment-sized defence systems and wipe out enemy combat columns or divisions in mobile warfare.

After listening to all the views expressed, there emerged certain points I would ponder over for a proposal to the Central Committee. Together with the General Chief of Staff's Office and the General Department of Logistics, I resolved the requirements of the B2 battlefield. As an immediate step, I decided to send 17,000 more combat troops. This would be huge effort of the North Vietnamese rear area, of Party cells, of administration and troop mobilization bodies at various levels. Between 1964 and 1973, the great rear area had provided all-out assistance. The provinces of the Red River-Left-Bank Military Zone had sent to South Việt Nam 560,000 men. In view of this emerging, great opportunity, we had to resolutely assist the battlefield.

I suggested that the experience of Military Zone IX be widely popularized, that the ideological work against "pacifism" and illusions be actively carried out and that vigilance in the face of the enemy's perfidious schemes and tricks be intensified. Efforts must be made to gradually mobilize troops on the spot to replenish the ranks of the main forces; militias and guerillas must also be developed. As regards combat strategies, in addition to attacks meant to wipe out enemy posts, military sectors and district centers, it was advisable to use special commandos to strike at enemy command establishments, airfields, harbors, and logistic bases.

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After the meeting, I heard reports from various departments under the General Chief of Staff's Office, the Central Team, Foreign Ministry comrades, and members of the Four-Party Joint Military Commission.

From various sources, it was learned that, during the visit to Sài Gòn of US Vice-President Agnew in late January 1973, the United States had tried to assuage Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's panic. It is

worthnoting that no promise, open or hinted, was made beyond the plans "Enhance" and "Enhance plus" to bring formidable quantities of weapons and war materials to South Việt Nam. After his March 1973 visit to the United States, Thiệu had no hope of getting anything more than an empty promise at San Clemente: "You can count on us".

At that time, the Watergate scandal had flared up. Nixon had been forced into a passive, helpless position. The United States wanted to forget both the Việt Nam War and the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu Puppet Administration. Political cleavage developed between Kissinger and Thiệu, between Nixon and Thiệu, and between the US Congress and the Sài Gòn Regime. Thiệu was deeply concerned about the possibility of being abandoned by the United States.

People in Sài Gòn were in a complex state of mind. The puppet army and administration were anxious and in disarray when *Việt Cộng* officers and fighters appeared in the streets. Some people guessed that the *Việt Cộng* would take over Sài Gòn once the Americans had left.

The US troops had completely pulled out. There were no longer the disruptions as in the past. Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield was less noisy; there were no longer any sorties of US military aircraft. Business circles regretted the "fortune-making" time when US troops were present. The wives of puppet soldiers no longer worked for Americans, polishing shoes or selling cigarettes around US garrisons. Rice in the six western Nam Bộ provinces no longer flowed to Sài Gòn in the same high volume as in the past. Imports were reduced. Unemployment was rampant. Money was devalued very quickly. Prices increased by leaps and bounds. Corruption prevailed at all levels without exception. The army abounded with "ghost soldiers"[1]. All officials tried to amass fortunes for their futures.

To remain in existence, the puppet administration made every effort to press-gang troops. This situation caused great disarray

1. These did not actually exist, yet their names were included in army lists for the wages that were automatically paid to their families.

and worry among the people. The more the troops were pushed into land encroachment and communication restoration operations, the higher were the casualties of the puppet army. The leopard-skin pattern on the map of South Việt Nam was a daunting threat to Nguyễn Văn Thiệu.

Initially, positive signs of change emerged among various battlefields. Many localities launched resolute ripostes against the enemy; they managed to develop efficient ways of fighting, and gradually regained the initiative. However, these changes were not yet widespread. Misconceptions and negative actions could not be overcome overnight.

Concerning the building of forces in South Việt Nam, it remained for us to resolve quickly the imbalance between the main forces and the local troops, as well as between the concentrated army and the militia and guerilla forces. Our collective armed forces sustained losses, especially in the plains. It would be difficult, we realized, to raise the combat capacity of our main forces back to their early 1972 level. The building of regional bases proved slow-going, while economic construction and production promotion had not resolved food shortages, especially in eastern Nam Bộ and in the Zone V plains.

In assessing the situation of the puppet army, we could see that its numerical strength continued to grow behind additional US military and economic aid. Its frenzied attempts at consolidation, along with its grass-roots system of defence and coercion, enabled it to maintain control over populated and wealthy urban areas, exploit human and material resources locally, control important axes of communication, and cause us to suffer losses.

Despite these advantages, Sài Gòn's puppet army and administration also had serious weaknesses. Their ranks were full of contradictions. The people's struggle was on the increase. After the withdrawal of half a million US and satellite troops, the puppet army and administration became seriously demoralized. The combat capacity of the puppet troops was now markedly reduced. In 1971, we encountered great difficulties in coping with 30 enemy battalions involved in the encroachment operation against the U Minh area. This year, the attack launched against eight communes

in Chương Thiện (Zone IX) by 25, then 50, and finally 75 enemy battalions ended in defeat.

In an overall review of the situation since the Paris Agreement had been invoked, we determined that we'd grown stronger in terms of potentiality and forces with the exception of initial losses. However, a fundamental problem arose; we would have to resolutely combine armed, political, jurisdical, and diplomatic struggles with agitation among enemy troops to foil all acts of sabotage directed at the Paris Agreement. We would also have to reverse the balance of forces in our favor, impose peace on the enemy and then vanquish him in peace; at the same time, we had to stand ready to defeat him if he chose to resume the war.

In preparation for the Central Committee meeting, we discussed the issue of building our forces in the North and South, as well as how best to wipe out the puppet army's live forces so as to reverse the balance of power on the battlefield. I directed the General Chief of Staff's Office to make diligent efforts to set up military corps, the "main force fists", as we called them, that would be used in decisive moments. We directed them to study modes of combat focused on wiping out military subsectors, district centers, enemy combat columns and brigades devoted to rescue operations, and annihilating enemy divisions.

With regard to our struggle against the enemy's "pacification" attempts, our experiences in the Mekong Delta, and more particularly in that of Zone IX, showed that our army and people were fully capable of foiling such a strategic scheme. I requested the General Chief of Staff's Office to actively study this problem, paying particular attention to necessary orientations and modes of combat, how best to stick to the lands and the populations, and coordinate our forces in resolute ripostes to the enemy. The Central Military Committee and the General Chief of Staff's Office received a report on the situation in Zones VIII and IX made by Lê Đức Anh who had recently returned from the front line. The resolute and vigilant stand of the Party Committee and the Command of Zone IX resulted in substantial gains right from the start. The new fighting showed that the more flexible and creative we were, the more headway we made toward victory. Văn Tiến Dũng and Lê Trọng Tấn personally

directed the Combat Operation Department and the Militia Forces Department to coordinatively prepare a special conference to be held at the end of the year.

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The careful preparation of the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command was diligently and secretly carried out in two months. The 21st Central Committee Plenum opened at the end of June 1973.

The first phase of the meeting lasted one week and was attended by Central Committee members. The report of the Central Military Committee carefully analyzed the situations of both the enemy and ourselves in South Việt Nam. The focus of this report concerned the six month period after the signing of the Paris Agreement; the complex international political climate at the time; the schemes and tricks of the Nixon Administration and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu Administration; the balance of forces on the battlefield and throughout the whole country generally; the strengths and weaknesses of the enemy vis-a-vis our own; the possibilities of the US-puppets and the strategic changes which could result. The report also made recommendations to the Central Committee on orientations, policies and plans of action in South Việt Nam in the forthcoming period with a view to stepping up the struggle in the provisionally occupied and disputed areas. It also advocated building up forces and consolidating the liberated zone.

With an acute strategic outlook, First Secretary Lê Duẩn reviewed the struggle of the South Vietnamese people and fighters since the 15th Central Committee's Resolution (1959), and asserted that our victories signified.

In a warm and eager voice that revealed the accent of a native of Central Việt Nam, he explained that after the signing of the Paris Agreement, the United States was still involved in Việt Nam, the enemy still retained strong positions, which, however, lay in unfavorable positions. He expressed that in the face of the US-puppet's scheme to blatantly sabotage the Agreement and carry on

the war, the South Vietnamese revolution must, of necessity, march forward through certain violence. Ours was a strategy of offense, he said. Military issues must be raised to the highest level possible. Political strategy at this juncture must be combined with military strategy, the attempt to effect agitation among enemy soldiers, and a juridical struggle to gain the population and our control. Lê Duẩn suggested a number of issues for discussion, and requested the other Central Committee members to rededicate themselves to the decision-making process.

In my address, I draw attention to the experience gained in the battle to retake Cửa Việt harbor (Quảng Trị} and in Military Zone IX's resolute riposte against the enemy, in fighting against "pacification" attempts, and in dissolving illusions about premature peace. Delving deeper into the nature of the US war of neocolonialist aggression, I made it clear that the United States was "Vietnamizing" the puppet army and administration and using them as props. Initially, the puppet army was able to resist effectively thanks to US firepower. But in the subsequent period, it would reveal insurmountable weaknesses vis-a-vis our increasingly more effective attacks that would quickly render it defeated.

Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng, Nguyễn Duy Trinh, Hoàng Quốc Việt[1], Văn Tiến Dũng, Lê Thanh Nghị[2], Lê Văn Lương[3], and Tố Hữu[4] raised issues of strategic importance in the political, military, diplomatic fields at home and abroad. Leaders of various battlefields (Mười Cúc[5], Trần Văn Trà[6], Năm Công, Trần Hữu Dực, Sáu Dân, Sáu Đường) contributed practical experience while recommendating many initiatives dealing with modes and measures of struggle.

The Central Committee Plenum lasted several days and was highlighted by a shared democratic spirit. The Central Committee

1. Chairman of the Presidium of the Việt Nam Fatherland Front.
2. Deputy Prime Minister.
3. Former member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Việt Nam, former Secretary of the Hà Nội Municipal Party Committee.
4. Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Việt Nam prior to the renovation period.
5. Late General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh.
6. Lieutenant General.

members demonstrating their sense of responsibility, carefully discussed the following: all problems related to the line and revolutionary strategy in South Việt Nam; the tasks of the rear area in North Việt Nam; the international line; Việt Nam-Laos-Cambodia solidarity; the strengthening of forces; the struggle to gain crossover populations and our control; the agitation among enemy troops; the work in urban areas and the liberated areas; front work; diplomatic work; and Party building. The views were expounded systematically while each member was allowed to take the floor repeatedly and without any time restriction.

Concerning the balance of forces, attendees of the meeting concurred with the views prepared by the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command to the effect that the potentialities and forces of the revolution in the South were stronger then than at any other period since 1954. After the US withdrawal, we had become stronger. From this assessment, the meeting concluded that a strategic opportunity would soon present itself.

Two possible developments were forecast:

One, with our active struggle, the enemy would be gradually compelled to implement the Paris Agreement; thereafter, the situation in the South would be stabilized, and peace could be actually restored. The struggle of our people, although protracted and arduous, would resolutely march forward.

Two, if the US-puppets obdurately sabotaged the Agreement, the military conflict might increase in intensity. In this scenario, the war would increase in scale and scope, and we would be forced to wage a fierce revolutionary war to win total victory.

The first possibility was unlikely, but we knew we must strive to enact it. At the same time, we must stand ready to cope with the second development.

A consensus was reached through our discussions. We determined that the fundamental task of the revolution in the South, in this new stage, was to achieve national unity by continuing our countrywide strategy of the people's democratic revolution. Whatever the developments, we realized that *the*

*revolution could win victory only through war. In any event, we must firmly grasp every opportunity given to us while maintaining our offensive strategy and providing flexible guidance with an aim toward victory.* As an immediate step, we must firmly hold in hand the armed forces, consolidate, develop and strengthen the three kinds of forces[1], overcome the imbalance. The disposition of forces must stretch out the enemy, thereby preventing him from launching encroachment attacks in specific areas. The gaining of crossover populations and land control and the development of the revolution's forces must be regarded as pressing, fundamental requirements in this new stage.

On July 6, 1973, the First Secretary concluded the Plenum by referring to the Central Committee consensus to liberate the South. Việt Nam would not be like Korea or Eastern Germany. This was a crucial resolution of historical and international significance. With this revolutionary method of combining military, political and diplomatic activities, and mobilizing the whole country for the kith-and- kin South, we were sure to succeed. The core belief of the current Central Committee Plenum was that the revolution in the South must continue its march along the path of revolutionary violence. We diligently carried aloft the banners of peace and justice, all the while struggling to compel the enemy to implement the Paris Agreement so we could defeat him. But if the enemy obdurately refused the terms of peace, we would have to wage a revolutionary war to liberate the South and reunify the country.

The terms of the Resolution of the 21st Plenum of the Party Central Committee had taken fuller shape since the extended meeting of the Politburo in May 1973. They were gradually perfected through many rounds of discussion and application. Vũ Tuân, Head of the Party Central Committee's Office, and I amended it over several successive weeks, carefully weighing each and every sentence. Finally, the Resolution was unanimously adopted on October 4, 1973, by the Plenum of the Central Committee. It concluded that *"The revolutionary path of*

1. The main forces, local troops, militias and guerillas.

*the South was a path of revolutionary violence. Whatever the developments, we must firmly grasp our opportunities, and protect our strategic line of offense."*

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By instruction of the Army High Command, the Central Team diligently studied and amended the first draft of the *"Strategic Plan"*. Many problems presented themselves for us to ponder and resolve on our quest for victory. Based on the views of First Secretary Lê Duẩn, who advocated a combined, general insurrection and primarily city-wide attack to liberate the South, a second draft was submitted on July 16, 1973 under the title *"Draft Plan on Generalized Attacks and Insurrections in the South"*, Although more concrete, this draft still contained major points for further study by the Central Team. One month later, on August 15, 1973, it completed a third draft elaborating the particulars behind the planned general insurrection, forecasting the conditions and circumstances which would lead to it, and reiterating the necessity for undertaking it. The draft also outlined measures to raise our overall political-military strength in order to undertake the general uprising and attack.

Our opportunity had nearly arrived. But winning victory was not a simple matter.

I directed the Central Team to report on the experience of the Soviet people in ending their great patriotic war, that of the Chinese people's liberation war, and the final stage of a number of other wars. At the headquarters of Military Zone III, I personally listened to a report of Hoàng Minh Thảo on the experience of the Soviet Union. Because of the scale of a modern war, after the counteroffensive in Stalingrad and the decisive fighting on the Kursk arc, the Soviet army and the Allied Forces launched widespread campaigns to bring about a quick ending of the war. I also listened to a report of Hoàng Minh Phương on the way of fighting of the Chinese army in the final stage. The Chinese Liberation Army launched few attacks on towns and cities; it was more inclined to besiege cities, to wipe out enemy reinforcements,

and to strike at surrounding areas. However, like the Soviet Union, China had to undertake major annihilation strikes and to attack cities. In connection with the situation in South Việt Nam, I found that general uprising could not be put in the first place; of necessity, there must be major attacks to wipe out an important part of the enemy's live forces, create conditions for attacks on the cities, the main lairs of the enemy in close combination with the mass uprisings to end the war and win total victory. I had many exchanges of views on this subject with First Secretary Lê Duẩn. Finally, he agreed on the need to bring into play and, to coordinate three strong fists, namely the rural areas, the cities, and the main forces, to carry out general attacks and general insurrections to win victory.

I requested the Central Team to carry on its study and perfect the draft's strategic plan with these aims. Once again, the experienced brains of the consultative staff had to work day and night.

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On September 12, 1973, our government warmly welcomed Fidel Castro, Prime Minister of the Republic of Cuba, on a visit to Việt Nam. The General Chief of Staff's Office brought him to Quảng Bình, Vĩnh Linh and the liberated areas of Quảng Trị.

I had traveled to this fire-line on two occasions in early 1973, each time in the course of survey tours of Cửa Việt, Khe Sanh, Bản Đông, Lùm Bùm, the Tà Lê River across Phulanhich Slope, and also during a trip to the recapitulation conference on the Highway 9-Southern Laos Campaign where plans for the consolidation of the liberated zones had been made. The devastation created by US bombs and bullets, along with the ruins of Cồn Tiên, Dốc Miếu, Quán Ngang, and Hill 241 caused Fidel to express his utmost emotion and admiration over our perserverance. Here countless cadres, fighters and civilians had fallen during the strategic attacks and counter-attacks of 1971-1972; they had accomplished immortal feats in our struggle to destroy American and puppet troops. They had died trying to create potentialities and forces to lead our national salvation resistance to victory.

The headquarters of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Việt Nam were located near Đông Hà, close to Highway 9. The complex was comprised of wooden houses, undulant iron roofs, and plank ceilings. Above this, a gold star on a red and green flag fluttered in the wind.

The situation was not yet stable. With his expeditious and secretive style, as in the Moncada battle, the first Head of State visited the South Vietnamese liberated zone carrying a pistol at his side. Fidel Castro passionately contemplated various sites, complying with no diplomatic formality. On some nights, he changed dwellings several times, sleeping only for a few minutes on long beds.

During his visit to Đông Hà Township, the revolutionary representative of Latin America expressed these reflections: "This complex of positions was destroyed in only a few days of combat under the bombs of the US Air Force. This was indeed a feat beyond imagination."

The haunting realities of the battlefield had won over the hearts of many international friends.

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After the Central Committee Plenum, many problems presented themselves to us. The Central Military Committee, working continuously over successive days, discussed the establishment of main force corps, extensive cadre work, and plans for all-around improvement of the armed forces to meet the requirements of our situation. Foreseeing the possibility of large-scale combat operations in the near future, it was decided that a group of military cadres would be sent to attend a complementary course on combined military operations at the Voroshilov Insitute in Moscow. The head of the group was Brigadier General Nguyễn Hữu An; the deputy head was Colonel Lê Hữu Đức. I met with Nguyễn Côn and Đỗ Mười about the possibility of combining economic with defence business, mobilization of forces, troop recruitment, the army involvement in economic construction in North Việt Nam and

in the South Vietnamese liberated areas. The Council of Government ratified the Defence Ministry's plan to expand the Trường Sơn road, including the consolidation of western Trường Sơn and the construction of one in eastern Trường Sơn. The engineering forces of Corps 559 and the communication and transport branches of North Việt Nam were mobilized for the construction of the strategic road.

On November 15, 1973, First Secretary Lê Duẩn sent a message to the Central Military Board for South Việt Nam, the Party Committees for Zone V, Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên and Tây Nguyên. The message, indicating two new considerations, emphasized that "The developments in South Việt Nam depended on our de facto strength and engagement counter measures. The idea behind the first consideration was that we needed to clearly realize that *the revolution in South Việt Nam can only win victory through an uninterrupted revolution and violence,* reliance on the political and armed strength of the people, and promotion of the new, favorable factors brought about by the Paris Agreement. Such was the basic spirit of the 21st Resolution."[1]

Under instructions of the Party Secretariat and the Standing Bureau of the Central Military Committee, the General Political Department disseminated the 21st Resolution throughout the entire army for study and full comprehension.

A conference of senior cadres from Military Zone IV northwards was held in the Assembly Hall of the General Political Department in Hà Nội.

I devoted a whole day to explain in detail the spirit of the historic Resolution.

In my overall review of the conflict from the beginning of the anti-US fight to the signing of the Paris Agreement, I focused on the great victory of our army and people in defeating successively the US imperialists' strategies first of "special war" and then of "local war". By a surprise thunder-blow dealt to most US-puppet leading

1. Lê Duẩn. *Thư vào Nam* (Letters to the South). Sự Thật Publishing House. Hà Nội. 1985, pp. 333-334.

centers during the Tết Mậu Thân general insurrection and uprising (1968), we drove the enemy into an extremely serious strategic crisis. He could no longer escalate the war; instead, he had to gradually de-escalate it and then return demoralized to the negotiating table. He passively had to change his strategy, "de-Americanize" and then "Vietnamize the war", the latter strategy which, right from its appearance, revealed factors that would contribute to an unavoidable defeat.

Marked by heroic and creative deeds, the prodigious efforts of our army and people throughout the country helped to defeat the aggressive design of the United States and compel it to sign the Paris Agreement. Following 18 years of patriotic anti-US struggle, we recorded a great victory: several hundred thousand US and satellite troops had to pull out of South Việt Nam while our armed and political forces remained and continued to build on successes in the South. As a result, the balance of force underwent a major change in our favor. Throughout the whole country, we became markedly stronger in terms of both potentiality and strength. This was the main factor which augured the approach of an historic opportunity.

This time, the Central Committee Plenum issued a resolution affirming that the revolutionary path of the South remained that of revolutionary violence, that our strategy remained offensive in nature, and that there could be absolutely no illusion. The plan of action, supported by the whole Party, its people and army, centered on quickly creating a new potentiality, a new strength, and to solidify the collective resolve to march forward to final victory: liberate the South and reunify the country.

In conclusion, I requested the General Chief of Staff's Office to study combat modes for annihilating enemy puppet battalions in their defence positions and destroying enemy reinforcement brigades in plain areas. Diligent efforts were to be made toward organizing the training of strategic military and arms of the technical services according to new combat modes. I also urged the General Political Department, the General Department of Logistics and the General Department of Technique to rapidly work out and finalize plans for preparation in all realms in order to meet in time the requirements of the war.

On the South Việt Nam battlefield, our army and people launched a fierce resistance against the enemy, foiling most of his "pacification" and encroachment attempts. In Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên, we succeeded in restoring our position of strength prior to the signing of the Paris Agreement. In Zone V, we regained areas that had been encroached upon by the enemy. In Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands), we managed to open new areas of control in Trung Nghĩa (Kon Tum) and Chư Nghé (Pleiku). In eastern Nam Bộ, we launched strong attacks which resulted in the liberation of the Kiến Đức -Bù Bông area and a corridor linking Nam Bộ to Tây Nguyên. In Zone VIII, we gained control over a number of areas south and north of Highway 4. In Zone IX, right from the start, we launched well-timed attacks and counterattacks; as a result, not only did we manage to shore up the situation between the enemy and ourselves prior to January 27, 1973, we also liberated important regions.

The great rear area mobilized human and material resources for the front line. The Liberation Forces units were completed. Several arms of the technical services had arrived on the battlefield. The Trường Sơn strategic transport route was expanded and prolonged. Hundreds of thousands of tons of weapons, ammunitions and fuel flowed to our troops on the battlefield. The strength of the people's war in the South had multiplied. Time was supporting us.

*Chapter III*

# FUNDAMENTAL PLAN AND OPPORTUNITY PLAN

The 1974 Lunar New Year was drawing closer. The situation in the South had grown more intense. The Central Committee's Resolution was gradually penetrating at grass- roots levels.

I had working sessions with Lê Ngọc Hiền[1], Vũ Lăng[2], and Võ Quang Hồ[3]. At that time, Lê Trọng Tấn was assigned to Zone V to assist militarily in the implementation of the 21st Resolution. The military situation in the Southern locales of Quảng Trị - Thừa Thiên, Zone V, and from Tây Nguyên south to the Mekong Delta, was developing in our favor. We exchanged views on the combat orientation in 1974-1975 with increasingly quicker developments. We undertook preparations for the dispatch of an additional 10,000 men and 3,000 tons of weapons to Zones VIII and IX, training to raise the combat capacity of the army as well as the command capacity of officials at all levels, and activation of strategic transports to the South.

On January 30, 1974, the Politburo held an extended meeting to discuss opportunities for intensifying the revolution in the South. Participants included members of the Central Military Committee, leaders of B2, Võ Chí Công and Hoàng Minh Thảo.

On behalf of the Military Committee, I reported on recent military and political developments, described a series of increasingly favorable changes on the military front, and proposed a strategy of all-out, coordinated combat unti1 1975. Võ Chí Công followed with a detailed account of the situation in Zone V. Issues which he asserted were in need of resolution included: the struggle

1. Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff.
2, 3. Head and Deputy Head of Operation Department respectively.

against enemy attempts to set up more posts for further encroachments on our zones; our efforts toward enemy disintegration and annihilation; mobilization of the citizens, especially Catholics, Buddhists, and third forces to weaken the enemy's coercive machinery. Trần Độ made a report on the marked, yet slow military changes occurring in Nam Bộ since August 1973. He suggested the possibility that the United States would accept defeat. Phạm Văn Đồng advised that we seek "critical points" in order to bring about quicker changes. Hoàng Văn Thái described improvements on the battlefield, and explained that in fighting the puppet army, we needed to create a surprise element; enemy positions, district centers, and military subsectors must be wiped out; military and political struggle and propaganda among enemy troops must be combined to foil the enemy's pacification attempts.

Politburo members agreed with the above mentioned reports and suggested measures to intensify our efforts in military, political, and diplomatic spheres.

In conclusion, Lê Duẩn pointed out that in view of the equilibrium obtaining in the world situation when nobody could hold a hegemonic position, it was not easy for the United States to effect a comeback in South Việt Nam. But whether or not the United States would attempt to come back depended mainly on our efforts. If we dealt strong blows and managed to break the "equilibrium", it would be difficult for the United States to stage a comeback. The problem now was for us to step up the all-round struggle in a more "skillful" way, to create an opportunity, and seize it at once when it arose in order to win victory.

After days of tense, highly intensive work, my health quickly deteriorated. Doctors repeatedly advised me to rest, but work did not allow it.

Shortly after my visit to the doctors, while on the way to work, one morning I suddenly felt a violent pain in my stomach. The sudden ailment coincided with migraine-like discomfort and imperventilation. In an instant, I fainted. When I came to, I found myself on board a helicopter returning to Hà Nội.

Medical experts in Military Hospital 108 worked diligently but could not diagnose my disease. I was exhausted, my belly violently spasming with unbearable pain.

Finding me in "near-death", the Party's Politburo decided o evacuate me to the Soviet Union for treatment on board a special plane. Expecting complications, I was accompanied by Dr. Nguyễn Thế Khánh, Director of Hospital 108, and Drs. Trần Văn Hiến and Phạm Văn Ngà.

I was seen off by many comrades and friends.

Before boarding the plane, I thanked, in a voice laden with emotion, Lê Đức Thọ and Lê Thanh Nghị. These men had come to the airfield along with comrades working in the Party Central Committee's Office, the Military Committee's Office, the Defence Ministry and other friends on behalf of the Politburo. I thought it would be difficult for me to come back!

Upon arriving, the Soviet Union's Party Central Committee ensured that I received the best possible medical attention. Medical experts at the Moscow Central Hospital attended to me with dedicated care. However, the incidence of acute pain became more and more frequent, and at the same time more and more violent. Once, during dianostic tests, my heartbeat stopped and I had to be revived! Consultations followed consultations, and yet the cause of my illness remained unknown.

I will always remember the dedication shown by Doctors Smaghin, Krapivin, and Irine. Finally, the mysterious disease was discovered. That was bile-stone in a soft form very difficult to be detected. I had caught that disease for many years without knowing it!

At that time, my gall bladder had been greatly inflated. It was necessary to effect at once a surgical operation. Otherwise, my life would be in danger. That was a case of major surgery with a 50% mortality rate. The doctor who operated on me was Professor Malak, 71 years old, a labor hero, a senior specialist of the Health Ministry, the best Soviet specialist on bile.

Believing I had little hope of recovering, I wrote a last will. Besides personal affairs, I offered advice on cadre training, as well

as various policies and steps that would be necessary to push the revolution in South Việt Nam to high tide.

Fortunately, the surgery I underwent was a success. I was immobilized on a sick bed for 11 days and lost over 10 kg. I spent the Tết holiday in a hospital thousands of miles from Việt Nam, burning with impatience to get back to work.

With a clear understanding of my state of mind, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union arranged a direct flight to Hà Nội once it was determined I was healthy enough to leave the hospital.

Although I was still weak and tired, only a few days later I returned to the Defence Ministry to visit my comrades and get re-acquainted with wartime developments. Everybody was very relieved to see me out of danger .

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By April, 1974, the danger had passed.

During the period when my health was being monitored at Military Hospital 108, I devoted myself to hearing reports and approving Central Military Committee resolutions on local military work and the fight against enemy pacification operations in South Việt Nam.

At that time, the US-puppets were frantically stepping up their "rural pacification" plan. This was the core of the Nixon doctrine, the most prominent feature of which was the creation of indigenous reactionary forces that would aid and abet US global strategy. The more than 280,000 "pacification" operations undertaken by the puppet army over the previous year showed that it regarded this as an appropriate opportunity for survival. Through a complex system of positions, the militia, civil guard, civil defence, the organization of puppet officials, spies, police, and reactionary political organizations, the enemy made every effort to strike at populated areas in order to establish firm control over their inhabitants and build material bases for the puppet

administration in the hope of denying mass bases to the uprisings of our compatriots. The enemy was carrying out the "motto" of Adviser Kissinger: "We had rather 100% control over 60% of the territory of this country (i.e. South Việt Nam) than 60% control over 100% of its territory". Nguyễn Văn Thiệu openly stated: "Pacification is now a primodial strategic step, the final round of a life-and-death struggle. Life is here and death is hear, too!"

In 1973, despite the many difficulties it found itself encountering, the Sài Gòn Puppet Administration continued its wartime efforts and achieved certain definite results.

The enemy encroached upon our "liberated enclaves", which comprised 400 total hamlets, and managed to occupy 700 new positions in these areas. Despite heavy casualties, the puppet army not only held together but actually increased its effectives. Local forces were tripled. Populations were subjected to its coercion and control. In Zone V, the enemy managed to consolidate a number of such areas while encroaching on others.

Overall, however, the South Vietnamese were unable to avoid the successful attacks and counterattacks of our army and people. Their activities gradually ground to a halt as they were driven to passive positions. They were unable to eradicate the "leopard-skin" pattern that had spread throughout the South.

On January 4, 1974, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu announced that war had been resumed. On the surface of things, his words appeared truculent, even confident, but in essence they were a cry for help. There were indications that the US planned to drop their support for Thiệu, whose political isolation had reached its peak. The Democratic Party, an instrument which Thiệu used to attract and mobilize the population in opposition to communism, was disintegrating just as Diệm-Nhu's Party for the "Laborers' Status" had done before. It had never developed into a broad-based organization; it was merely a group of avaricious opportunists who wrangled among themselves for their own benefit. The environment in which his Party operated proved even more harmful, allowing as it did high levels of corruption and bribery. Lucrative, self-serving posts were frequently arranged within the puppet's administrative apparatus.

On the economic front, Thiệu encountered tremendous difficulties after the US withdrawal and the cut in US aid. Unemployment was rife. Prices were increasing by leaps and bounds, and money was continually being devaluated. With a steady decline in import taxes, the treasury of the puppet administration suffered. The effectives of the puppet army could not be cut, although the salary of officers and soldiers was insufficient to ensure their subsistence. The "enhance" and "enhance-plus" plans increased Thiệu's dependence on the United States. New and replacement military equipment, valued at nearly US$750 million, entered South Việt Nam only to become a millstone around Thiệu's neck. His F5A and C123 planes were old, outdated and downgraded; they could not remain in activity without US replacement parts. The situation was similar with many other kinds of weapons and military hardware. Aid requests for maintenance accessories went unanswered by the United States. Combat capacity of the puppet army markedly declined. Strategic disposition of forces was dispersed. It would be extremely difficult for them to cope with a major offensive from our troops.

The South Vietnamese fought fiercely, especially in the plains of Zones V and VIII. Since late 1973, we had managed to stave off a major part of the enemy's "pacification" and encroachment activities. The people's war was maintained and intensified across various areas. We regained nearly four million people, including 1,200,000 inhabitants from the liberated zone. With almost 100,000 combatants sent from the rear area, the strength of our main forces in South Việt Nam increased substantially; our technical equipment rapidly improved as well. Although numbers of local armed forces were not greatly increased, they had still managed to make gains in combat. Construction of the liberated zone was expedited comprehensively. With every passing day, the position and prestige of the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Revolutionary Government were enhanced.

In the North, the political-economic situation was stable. Farmers had enjoyed favorable weather conditions all year, and banner crops were reaped successively. In October 1973, the first strategic mobile main force formation of the Việt Nam People's

Army in the anti- US resistance war was set up. This force was known as the First Army Corps, codenamed "Quyết Thắng" (determine to win victory) and gathered in its ranks the combat-tested main force Divisions 308, 312, and 320. The organization of strategic military formations on the South Vietnamese battlefield was undertaken to meet the new requirements of the war.

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In March 1974, while I was receiving medical treatment in the Soviet Union, the Central Military Committee held an important conference to discuss the implementation of the 21st Resolution of the Central Committee in the military field.

The conference had been prepared by Hoàng Văn Thái[1] and Lê Trọng Tấn, Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff. Lê Đức Anh, Commander of Military Zone IX, who had arrived in Hà Nội in February 1974 to report on the situation of the war to the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, also attended the meeting.

After hearing Lê Trọng Tấn's report on the military project, the conference made an overall assessment of the situation in the South since the signing of the Paris Agreement. They proceeded to set down the orientation and measures that would be necessary to create new potentiality and strength for military activities in the approaching dry season of 1974-75. In order to expedite strategic preparations for combat at the end of the 1973-74 dry season and in the 1974 rainy season, we were faced with the following tasks: to complete the first stage of the transport plan of support for the battlefield, then immediately start the second stage; step up the building of the local armed forces; finalize the network of strategic roads and roads specifically designed for the campaign; develop our oil pipeline further southwards; build logistic installations along Road 559 as well as

1. In early 1974, Hoàng Văn Thái, after a period of medical treatment in the German Democratic Republic, had returned to North Việt Nam and become First Deputy Chief of the Army General Staff and Deputy Minister of Defence. He was replaced by Trần Văn Trà as Commander of B2.

in designated liberated areas; complete all phases of our troop recruitment plan for 1974, followed by the first phase for 1975; and consolidate our main force army, especially the strategic mobile main forces in the North.

Văn Tiến Dũng had not been able to attend the meeting. After returning from his working trip, he approved the conference's final content, adding important items for further consideration. After the Politburo gave its approval, he signed the resolution on behalf of the Central Military Committee.

The Central Military Committee assessed that in 1973 the balance between our forces and those of the enemy showed that the potentiality and our revolutionary forces in the South were fundamentally strong, that they were developing and fully capable of moving the revolution steadily forward. The US puppets were encountering ever greater difficulties, to the extent that they were now the comparatively weaker side. The situation was developing more and more to our advantage.

In forthcoming years, our primary task would continue to be to defeat the enemy's "pacification" and encroachment plans; to make gradual political and ideological inroads within towns and cities; to prepare proper conditions and opportunities to bring about a revolutionary upsurge; to build up and train our main force army; to gradually increase the scale of annihilation attacks against the puppet army; to build up base areas in the South; to improve and strengthen the North in areas of the economy and national defence; to stand prepared to crush any new enemy manoeuvers. All of this was designed to modify the all-around balance of forces to our advantage. We held in our hands the opportunity to win victory, but to avail ourselves of it we would have to coordinate, with all of our ingenuity, hammerstrikes of the three strong "fists": the main force, the countryside, and the urban areas; to bring about by surprise a sudden change in the balance of power; and to win absolute victory.

A pressing requirement was to gain the populations, to be master in the plain, to liberate mountainous areas, to solidly establish there our control, step by step to develop the potentiality and forces of the revolution in the South. The Central

Military Committee placed special emphasis on the need to firmly grasp the strategic offensive thought, to take the initiative in launching resolute attacks and counterattacks in plain areas, in the mountains, and in rear areas.

In the mode of activity, it was necessary to maintain and develop the local people's warfare while simultaneously intensifying medium- and large-scale main force combat operations. We realized, too, the needs to carry out fighting, further build our forces, and develop our readiness for launching large-scale annihilation attacks whenever the opportunity arose. Moreover, we would clearly have to push up the development of struggles in urban areas, especially Sài Gòn.

I warmly welcomed this resolution. Before leaving for medical treatment in the Soviet Union, I had repeatedly stressed the need to strengthen our efforts at developing the local people's warfare. Militias and guerillas served as on-the-spot forces to oppose "pacification" attempts. In combat, I believed we needed to use local troops to wipe out battalion-sized enemy units, while our main forces tried to annihilate enemy brigades or divisions. It was imperative that we would not allow the enemy to destroy the "leopard-skin" pattern in the South. In addition, effective attacks must be carried out by our main forces against strategic towns and cities, as well as the enemy's headquarters, in order to effect quick, decisive changes on the battlefield.

In early April 1974, the Central Military Committee held a conference of senior cadres, stationed mainly in the northern military zones, whose task would be to propose and realize the 21st Resolution. The Committee also sent urgent messages to make the resolution known to the Southern battlefields.

The General Chief of Staff's Office, the General Political Department, the General Department of Logistics, and the General Department of Technique together instructed some major tasks, laying particular stress on the stepping up of ideological work; propaganda among enemy troops; the arrangement of cadres; the building of strategic, mobile main forces; and the setting up of strong army corps organized and trained for combat with large-scale coordination of military units. In conjunction with variously

involved ministries and sectors, the Defence Ministry was to mobilize and recruit soldiers for dispatch to battle areas. Moreover, they would attempt to strengthen the people's anti-aircraft defence in the North, consolidate the Trường Sơn strategic roads, build up a system of storehouses, and protect and maintain telecommunications, logistics, and technical supplies.

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During my time abroad receiving medical treatment, the fourth draft of the strategic plan was written. Reading it over, I became somewhat distressed by its assessment of the enemy. The plan maintained that the Sài Gòn Puppet Administration "was compelled to implement those parts of the Agreement that would impede our march forward and help them to avoid collapse. They would continue to sabotage the Agreement and carry on the war". With regard to the possibility of US intervention, it explained that the United States was not likely to intervene with land forces, but could use air and naval forces in the South, with similar, subsequent deployments to the North. It suggested, too, that the US might be able to launch air strikes on both zones simultaneously. Concerning strategic measures, this draft underscored the rule of combining military and political manoeuvers, attacks, and uprisings that would climax, when the opportunity arose, in a general insurrection leading to victory. It was worth noting that the current draft reiterated that if the war was to magnify in scale, the main areas from which we would need to attempt to destroy the enemy's main forces was Tây Nguyên (the Central Highlands), then eastern Nam Bộ and Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên.

There were as yet many major, unsolved problems concerning the enemy as well as ourselves – when would our respective opportunities present themselves, and what military strategies would best serve our respective purposes? When to spring an attack? In what way to employ forces? If major annihilation attacks were to be undertaken, from which directions should we launch them? The Central Military Committee and of the Central Team

contended that an attack on Tây Nguyên would sound an alert for the enemy to take counter measures in Sài Gòn and the Nam Bộ delta. It would then be difficult for us to follow with attacks. Therefore, it would be advisable to select Nam Bộ as the main orientation; in the direction of Tây Nguyên, we would attack only Đức Lập in order to open a route to the Nam Bộ delta. I and some others were inclined to select Tây Nguyên as the main orientation; here, we felt, conditions were favorable for the launching of major annihilation attacks.

Our exchanges had attained no definite end.

I suggested that Hoàng Văn Thái and Lê Tọng Tấn, together with members of the Central Team, would analyze and assess both our potentiality and our overall forces as a basis for future decision-making. I advised them to select either Tây Nguyên or eastern Nam Bộ as the strategic direction from which, once confident of our readiness, we would attack. It would be necessary to seek comprehensive improvements in the quality of our troops, while training our main forces with the aim of fighting large-scale, coordinated battles. We collectively heeded the following directive of the Central Military Committee:

"No matter the extent to which our political opportunities appear favorable, it remains critical that we bring about the collapse of the puppet army and its administration. Our attack must be launched before the enemy's. That is why, in each case, we must have comparatively strong, concentrated forces. In its development and employment, educational initiatives must be carefully undertaken and made to remain an effective weapon in our revolution. Whatever the circumstances, powerful forces must be assembled in South Việt Nam."

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In late May 1974, the Army High Command organized a conference attended by almost all representatives of the southern battlefields to discuss the efficacy of our fight against the enemy's "pacification" scheme. When approving the report of the General

Chief of Staff's Office, I made a point to commend the Combat Operation Department as well as the Militia Department, the latter of which had carefully prepared its content under the guidance of Trần Văn Quang, Deputy Chief of the General Staff's Office. The experiences we shared and learned from one another included the following: 1) useful perspectives on violent revolution and offensive revolutionary strategies; 2) a sound assessment of the enemy's own strategies and tactics; 3) the decision to promote throughout the armed forces a permanent state of vigilance and combat readiness; 4) the consolidation of the Party and mass organizations at the grass-roots level; 5) the development, on this basis, of political and local armed forces; 6) the capacity to bring into play appropriate modes of struggle; 7) to strengthen the converging strikes of our three military forces; 8) and to take greater initiative in launching attacks and counterattacks against the enemy.

In summer 1974, Văn Tiến Dũng and I were not in good health. Dũng had to take a holiday abroad, while I, too, tried to recover my health, often traveling to Đồ Sơn.

The situation developed very rapidly. Nobody could remain idle. I availed myself of the opportunity to meet with First Secretary Lê Duẩn, who often vacationed in Đồ Sơn.

He discussed with me a number of strategic problems. In our exchanges, we sought answers to some of the following central questions that faced us: What stage had the war in South Việt Nam entered? Had our long-anticipated opportunity finally arrived? Were conditions now ripe for a general offensive? If so, then how should we undertake our offensives and foment uprisings, and what would be the best strategy for us to follow? Finding that I had gradually recovered my health, Lê Duẩn emphasized to me that these affairs were not only important to our revolutionary aims, but crucial. He asked me to take upon myself even greater responsibility for the work I had to do and oversee. Since the 21st Plenum of the Party Central Committee, nearly one year had elapsed. Confronted with the formidable strength of the people's war, the other side found itself being pushed with increasing swiftness into a relentlessly downward course. The enemy's "pacification" and encroachment schemes had been clearly defeated. His system of

positions had been either fractured or destroyed. The "leopard-skin" pattern, far from being contained, was growing. The puppet army had been driven to the defensive on numerous battlefields. The US Congress's decision to cut the military aid budget for Indochina over the remaining six months of the 1974 fiscal year, ending on June 30, drove the puppet's army and administration to an ever more critical situation. The list of essential requirements that were now in short supply grew longer – ammunitions, medicines, money, etc. The military hospitals lacked medical supplies; in numerous instances, old bandages were washed for re-use.

In the United States, Nixon was beset on all sides because of the Watergate scandal. The political climate in the United States had become suffocating. Nixon, thoroughly compromised and effectively paralyzed, had difficulty coping with the US citizenry and its military. The US Congress had no plans whatsoever of sending new forces to the Sài Gòn Regime.

I raised this last point with Lê Duẩn, regarding it as an important, favorable factor in our opportunity to advance further. A decisive victory in the South must be won, I realized, before US elections in November 1976. Through our discussions, Lê Duẩn and I determined that the above- mentioned circumstances would allow us to defeat South Việt Nam's forces in two more years.

The situation on the battlefield quickly changed.

The Politburo decided to meet in September 1974 to assess the conflict and reassert its determination to win the war. My mind was occupied almost entirely with the following strategic problems: how would we launch major annihilation strikes against the puppet army; what would be our main direction of attack; what were our best strategic opportunities; and what were the possibilities of US re-commitment or intervention? I requested the General Chief of Staff's Office to carry out a study of the above issues. I, for my part, pondered and prepared a plan-of-action for the upcoming Politburo meeting.

At that time, the Mekong Delta held very high significance. Puppet General Dương Văn Minh once said that whoever controls the Mekong Delta would control Nam Bộ. Controlling the largest reserve

of human and material resources in the South was a huge advantage for the enemy. Despite this advantage, however, we were succeeding in repulsing the enemy's "pacification" plan. And we now found it possible to seize control over this area, thereby eliminating a source of new recruits for the puppet army. We also had the capacity now to drive Sài Gòn into a position of encirclement.

But how were we to create such an opportunity quickly? What must we do to assure ourselves of the opportunity, then prevent it from slipping through our hands? What would be the most effective strategic direction for us to use? How should we go about launching strikes that would wipe out puppet combat columns and divisions? These questions were constantly on my mind, even when I slept.

By that time, the draft of our strategic plan had been amended no fewer than five times. The draft, bearing number 133/TG 1 and dated May 16, 1974, was entitled "A Plan to Win Victory Following Several Years of Efforts to Bring about a Change in the Balance of Forces in the South".

The Military Committee, after directing the General Chief of Staff's Office to review and finalize the draft for submission to the Politburo, proposed a number of fundamentally critical ideas:

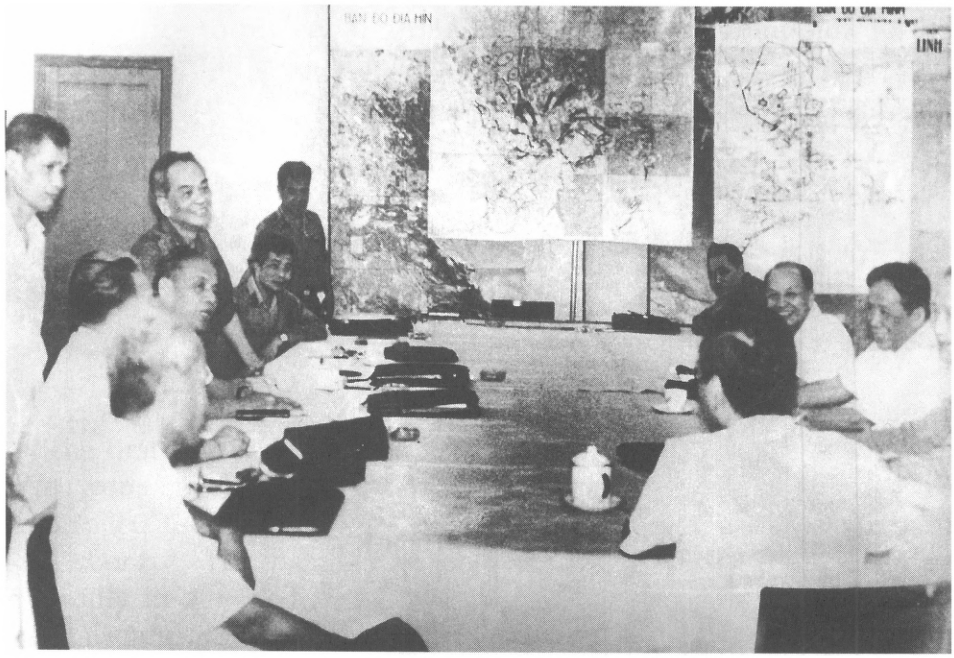
1. It was necessary to comprehend the full scope of developments since late 1973. As a result of persistent attacks and counterattacks against the enemy along with increased support from rear areas in the north, new potentialities and forces had increasingly emerged. In-depth studies would have to be carried out to analyze and assess the newly created factors as a basis for our strategic resolve.

2. A strategic plan should be worked out in two stages. The target of the first stage would be to win a victory of decisive significance. We were stronger militarily and politically than the enemy. We controlled the majority of rural and mountainous areas throughout the country. The balance of forces on the battlefield had shifted radically in our favor. The second stage would have to be based on military and political scenarios following a victory in the first stage; large-scale battles would have to be fought; additional attacks and uprisings would need to be initiated in order to win total victory.

▲ People from the Cửu Long delta transport ammunition to the front

▲ People from the Cửu Long delta transport weapons and ammunition to the front

▲ The Liberation Army advances into Sài Gòn on 30th April 1975



▲ In March 1975 the Politburo and Standing commission of the central Military Party Committee convened to decide on the plan to liberate Sài Gòn

3. With regard to strategic direction, it would be advisable, prior to stage one, to analyze the southern part of Tây Nguyên or eastern Nam Bộ. Special attention would be paid to the former, where the enemy had weak spots in his defence system and we could gather large forces to wipe out enemy numbers and thereby create a decisive turning point. We needed to build roads for efficient mobility, effect skilful camouflage, maintain secrecy regarding our plan of action, organize faints, create a surprise element, and ensure that our strategies and forces should not be disclosed in order to prevent our enemy from engaging in precautionary measures. As an immediate step, it would be advisable for our main forces to remain partially active.

4. A specific plan was needed for the North, concentrating on the mobilization of forces and the provision of human, material and technical assistance to the South. We must also develop a combat plan in anticipation of enemy attempts either to resume their war efforts or to effect a landing in the coastal area of the southern part of Zone IV .

5. In the area of force development, utmost attention was to be paid to increasing our fighting capacity. Organization must be prudent, and there must be balance among different military units in keeping with the requirements necessitated by the reality of the war. Special consideration would therefore be paid to the appointment and training of cadres in meeting our strategic requirements.

6. Regarding effective modes of combat, it would be necessary to make use of the collective experience we had gained in our fight against the South's "pacification" operations. A way must be found to enable our main forces to attack military subsectors, district centers, townships and major cities, and wipe out enemy combat columns. Large-scale, coordinated operations must be undertaken to destroy enemy divisions.

7. To study plans to intensify national defence along with economy, including troop involvement in economic construction as well as preparatory work for the restoration of railways in the southern part of Zone IV.

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Some days later, the First Secretary invited Hoàng Văn Thái and Lê Trọng Tấn to visit Đồ Sơn. They had been asked to report on the current state of the war and engage in preparations for the upcoming meeting of the Politburo.

Before leaving, Thái and Tấn called on me together. Being leaders of the General Chief of Staff's Office, with much experience in staff work and combat, they had foreseen the need for, and prepared, various decisions on military strategy as well as combat in military campaigns. After giving me an account of the issues they would raise with Lê Duẩn, I responded with the impressions I had had since the Resolution of the 21st Party Central Committee Plenum. I devoted special attention to the perspectives on revolutionary violence, our strategies for winning victory, and the process of carrying out general offensives and insurrections when such opportunities arose.

On the evening of July 22, they called on me at my home immediately after their return from Đồ Sơn. I received them in the garden, under moonlight, with warm, familial affection. Hoàng Văn Thái had been a dear comrade of mine since the establishment of the Propaganda Group for the Liberation Army. Lê Trọng Tấn was a cadre possessing considerable combat experience whom I came to cherish very much after several military campaigns together. I did not foresee that these two men, although younger than I, could ever pass away, leaving behind their families, friends, and our army to mourn greatly for their loss.

That night, they reported in detail on their working session with Lê Duẩn.

At the very outset, they told me that Lê Duẩn had touched on three major areas:

- Assessment of the situation between the enemy and ourselves.

- Our strategic orientation in the South in 1975 and a few subsequent years.

- The reconstruction and defence of the North.

On the morning of July 20, Thái and Tấn reported extensively on their draft of the strategic plan. They mapped out the military

and political situation in the South, followed by a description of the major tasks underway, including preparations for an attack on Thượng Đức in Zone V and the second drive of strategic transport of Corps 559. They detailed developments in the construction of strategic roads for our campaign, along with the building of logistic bases in Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên, Zone V, Tây Nguyên and Nam Bộ. They discussed the results of troop recruitment drives; the building-up of forces; combat training for the troops; and the dispatch of human and material resources to the South. They concluded with the results of the implementation of the 21st Central Committee Resolution and of the March 1974 Central Military Committee Resolution, which had been approved by the Politburo.

The First Secretary inquired about the military situation in Quảng Trị, in eastern Nam Bộ, and in Military Zones V and IX, and also about the combat capacity of the South's army in the aftermath of the US withdrawal. Tấn reported that Southern colonel Nguyễn Văn Thọ, a brigade commander taken prisoner during the Highway 9-Southern Laos Campaign, had conceded during questioning that without US logistical support and weapons, all Southern military efforts would ultimately fail. When posed with the question as to how long the South's army could remain standing without direct US support, he replied: "For only two years."

Thái further reported on the need for decisive, annihilating blows against large main force formations, which would bring about immediate changes in the military situation and sudden developments. To this end, we must have enough forces at our disposal; in addition to material installations, technical and logistical supplies must also be guaranteed; potentialities and opportunities must be created.

On the afternoon of July 20, and during the whole day of July 21, Lê Duẩn discussed his views regarding problems with our strategic plan and with the strategic opportunity. He devoted a lot of time to an analysis of international feeling over the war in relation to our people's anti-US resistance for national unity and independence.

With an outlook on the overall situation, he made it clear to everyone that the conflict in Việt Nam and Indochina was a truly historical event, and that many big countries, including several in

Asia, considered Southeast Asia a strategic region in which it was worth vying for influence. The Việt Nam war had markedly weakened the United States. Many of these countries were afraid that a victory would make Việt Nam even stronger. Imperialist forces and international reactionaries had a convergence of views on this point.

However, these countries were not ready and strong enough to fight against Việt Nam. Accordingly, it became all the more pressing that we create opportunities for ourselves and seize them to win out-and-out victory.

In the way of combat, Lê Duẩn took the view that we needed to determine an effective strategy of attack and employ it to win a quick, decisive victory. As a result, the United States would have no time to move its hands and other countries would find it difficult to intervene. To wage extended battles and win huge victories, we must, from the standpoint of campaign strategy, have a strong main force army, and put to use its corps to annihilate entire enemy divisions. We would have to bring into play our overall strength. But this was a problem, as we needed sufficient theoretical and practical grounds to find the right solution. We needed to prepare ourselves now so that by 1975 we would be ready to effectively fight medium-size as well as large-scale battles in which we could destroy whole enemy divisions. It was crucial that we find a way to wipe out our enemy and disintegrate its ranks. A surprise element must be made available for us to use at any cost. It was advisable to cut the enemy into many sections, broaden the liberated zone, and create battle positions that were advantageous to us. More forces needed to be brought in from the North. Attention was to be paid to stepping up our overall revolutionary movement, which had already been sparked by such factors as sharp dissension in the enemy's ranks. In the near future, we realized, Nixon might be impeached and replaced by Ford. We needed to intensify our movement to have new potentiality and new strength.

Having received Lê Duẩn's perspectives, the General Chief of Staff's Office provided guidance to the Central Team in its efforts to finalize, in preparation for the Politburo meeting, the draft of a strategic plan.

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The situation continued to change quickly. Under tenacious pressure from various sides, Nixon was compelled to resign on August 9, 1974. This news struck Thiệu like a thunderbolt. Gerald Ford, Vice President since Agnew had resigned, replaced Nixon until 1976, when new presidential elections could be held. The United States found itself confronted by numerous difficulties. The US Congress decided to make additional cuts in its aid to Sài Gòn, which would amount only to US$701 million in the 1974-1975 fiscal year, or less than half the amount that had been designated during the 1972-1973 fiscal year. By way of appeasement, Ford gave Thiệu a dose of calmative: "I know that the first step in the current financial year approved by the Congress to assist the Republic of Việt Nam both in the military and the economic fields has worried you. Our legislative process is complicated and not yet integrated. Although more time is needed to persuade the Congress, I take one more pledge for you to believe that at last our support will be enough for both military and economic aids".[1]

On the battlefield, the activities of the puppet army were markedly reduced, especially those related to the air force, artillery and mobile means. Although he continued his noisy rhetoric about the war, Nguyễn Văn Thệu had already been forced to call on his troops "to fight in the poor people's pattern"!

In B2 (Nam Bộ and Zone VI), the enemy was repelled further, while in Zone V he was driven back. Promoting the victory, our troops broke through the Sài Gòn defence lines on the northern doorstep (Highway 7, Rạch Bắp, Bến Cát). In spite of frequent enemy encroachment attacks, our army succeeded in preserving the Lộc Ninh liberated area according to the directives of the Central Military Committee. The enemy's "pacification" plan for strategic, populated areas was foiled. The zone under its control was shrinking. Its forces were stretched thin and under pressure everywhere. Our troops had not only regained all areas liberated prior to January 28, 1973, but also liberated dozens of additional communes in the Mekong Delta. Base areas of resistance were broadened and consolidated. B2

1. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jerold L. Schecter. Op. cit.

forces made tremendous efforts both in combat and in battlefield preparations for the coming dry season.

A prominent military victory came for us in the annihilation of the Thượng Đức Military Subsector in Zone V between July 29 and August 7, 1974, which resulted in the liberation of Thượng Đức District Center and four communes, including 13,000 inhabitants. Following this battle, our troops repelled the counterattacks of the paratrooper division of Sài Gòn's general strategic reserves. This proved to be a key battle in the Autumn 1974 Campaign of Zone V. This battle began when Thượng Đức forced his way to the threshold of Đà Nẵng Base Complex. The puppet army reacted slowly, as their mobile forces lacked effectives and troop transport means. Morale of Sài Gòn's main forces and local troops was low. For the first time, a division of our main forces, together with local troops and citizens, defeated a division of the South's strategic reserves.

Along with victories recorded in Nông Sơn, Tiên Phước, Minh Long (Zone V), Tánh Linh (Zone VI), Nha Bích, and Tống Lê Chân (eastern Nam Bộ), the Thượng Đức battle allowed us to conclude that our mobile main forces were now stronger than those of the puppet army. A new situation had begun to emerge: the enemy no longer had the capacity to reoccupy its lost positions. Our troops were in position to attack and wipe out the enemy and its clustered fortifications, military subsectors, district centers, while claiming more land and liberating populations living on the border of the North-South zone.

From a strategic standpoint, these results were for the most part related to certain decisions we had made.

At the General Headquarters, I closely followed various developments on the battlefield, discovering that the war was changing at an increasing speed; the balance of power seemed suddenly in a precarious state. Our revolutionary experience over the past 20 years had prepared premises for future advance by leaps and bounds. Of paramount importance were certain subjective factors, such as the Party's leadership over the revolutionary movement and the theater of war, the conduct of the liberation war, and the Supreme Command's strategic guidance in certain periods.

At the beginning of 1973, we found ourselves in an overwhelmingly favorable position. The enemy had been compelled to take steps backward and pullout all US and satellite troops. Yet after the signing of the Paris Agreement, the situation suddenly became more difficult, and we had to admit there was even a risk of reversal.

How, then, after our leaders and commanders had determined various mistakes they had committed, engaged in self-criticism, and laid down appropriate plans of action, did we manage to regain our initiative to march forward again so quickly?

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During my vacations in Đồ Sơn, Võ Quang Hồ, Deputy Head of the Combat Operation Department, worked as a secretary to help me draft strategic plans. Sometimes, at the request of various newspapers, the Deputy Director of the Senior Military Institute helped me in writing articles; the Deputy Head of the Propaganda and Training Department drafted an important speech that I would deliver on December 22, the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Việt Nam People's Army.

The strategic plan was classified top secret. In Đồ Sơn, Võ Quang Hồ kept separate lodgings from me. Every day, all of our documents were subjected to strict security regulations.

During my summer vacation in Đồ Sơn, our principle work centered on the preparation of a strategic plan to win victory in the South. I read aloud each section of the plan for Võ Quang Hồ to write down, from an appraisal of the balance of military forces, to the current international climate, to specific strategies and steps we would need to take to realize our aims. We had now completed the sixth draft of this document.

At that time, the situation in the United States, and almost entirely throughout the world, had come to be in our favor. A matter for us to carefully consider was the possibility of US re-intervention to save the South. Upon analyzing various documents of the Foreign Ministry and reports coming out of the

Military Intelligence Department, I decided that a combination of thorough preparation and a resolute commitment to capitalize on our opportunity to topple the enemy would enable us to preempt US re-entry into the conflict. If the enemy, confronted with a major threat of collapse, managed to stave off final defeat long enough, the United States might eventually re-commit its resources to saving the South. A re-intervention such as this might take the form of new buildups of air and naval forces in the South, with operations extending into the North, or they might start simultaneous attacks and blockade against both the North and the South. US land forces, we knew, were not likely to be put to use. Yet, we had to pay careful attention to US reaction, over our strikes while simultaneously undermining the possibility of its re-intervention.

Our various battlefields were developing their attacks, especially from April 1974 onwards. With our existing forces in the South, we had the capacity to regain large parts of the Mekong Delta and the plains of Zone V; achieve our targets of reclaiming populations; destroy enemy forces; transform liberated zones and mountainous base areas into an integrated whole; sever enemy forces into several parts; and build and consolidate further the rear areas of the South. The revolutionary movement in towns and cities was still weak, but the groundwork we had laid for it was starting to solidify. There was the distinct possibility of gaining more ground when the South's army and administration was plunged into an all-out crisis. With regard to possible major insurrections in strategic towns and cities, we had to encourage their swift development while keeping a close eye on external events.

Our immediate aims were to overthrow the enemy's local administrations, liberate the countryside, compel the enemy to implement the Paris Agreement, create conditions to strengthen our movement in urban areas, and march forward to overthrow the South's administration. Our principle methods in achieving these aims were to launch deliberate attacks and incite local insurrections, with the hope that they would, under opportune circumstances, climax in a general offensive and a general insurrection.

On the basis of Politburo discussions, I detailed a plan to mobilize our efforts in preparation for three strategic, comprehensive blows as follows: main force strikes, rural attacks and urban attacks with a view to winning outright victory. Depending on a combination of the domestic war situation, the prevailing political climate internationally, and opportunities we had created for the advancement of our movement, we would be able to determine, to a great extent, the final shape of our victory and in what capacity to use our mobile forces from the North; we would win either complete or de facto victory, set up a three-component, transitional coalition government, implement the Paris Agreement, and create conditions to win a thorough victory.

Based on the combat alternatives worked out by the Central Team, the draft plan foresaw the launching of three strategic blows in all three areas where urban centers, especially Sài Gòn and Đà Nẵng, were considered critically important. The principle areas where our strategic offensive would be undertaken were Tây Nguyên and eastern Nam Bộ.

The plan's first stage predicted that in 1974, 1975 and 1976, with the forces we had in the South, we would make major gains in southern rural areas, turning the liberated areas into an integrated zone. We would also create a situation wherein cities and provincial towns would be tightly surrounded, producing an ever greater threat to our enemy. At the same time, we would rapidly develop our political forces while stepping up the open, legal movement of the third forces and the political struggle movement within urban populations. The entire people would be involved in the propaganda among enemy troops. Our main forces would wipe out whole enemy divisions. Specially well-trained troops would be deployed within striking distance of the enemy's air force, its logistic bases, and top-ranking agencies. Plans to build strategic and campaign roads would be completed to ensure the quick transport of material supplies as well as the mobility of troops preparing for large-scale offensives. We should also strive to secure international support.

In the second stage, after establishing control over major rural areas and encircling cities and provincial towns, we would prepare to undertake a general offensive and insurrection. Our main forces could wipe out enemy divisions in a short time. The South's army had sustained repeated strategic defeats, its administration had been plunged into a crisis of extreme isolation, its ranks were subjected to contradictions and differentiations, and, unlike them, we had managed to win international support.

The plan laid forth a strategy for 1976, then forecasted that the objective and subjective conditions might develop by early 1977. It clarified the different elements comprising our preparatory work, proposed aims for the development of our forces, targeted territory for our forces to liberate, and drew attention to minor operations for maintaining the military secrecy.

In August 1974, Văn Tiến Dũng returned from medical treatment abroad. Our discussions led to full agreement about the problems we faced. Right after the draft was finalized, it was forwarded to members of the Politburo as well as key members of the Central Military Committee. The Supreme Command foresaw an opportunity. The challenge for us now was determination and revolutionary strategy.

The building of "steel fists" for the last stage of the war, an idea I had repeatedly touched upon since the signing of the Paris Agreement, was urgently set into motion. As soon as our required conditions were met, the Army High Command, with agreement and support from the Politburo, diligently set out to build three mobile main force army corps: Army Corps I (codenamed Quyết Thắng), established on October 24, 1973; Army Corps II (Hương Giang) established on May 17, 1974; and Army Corps IV (Cửu Long) established on July 20, 1974.

On the 25th anniversary of Brigade 308 which became subsequently Division 308 (28 August), I invited President Tôn Đức Thắng to make a visit to the first mobile main force formation of the Việt Nam People's Army. In the past, Brigade 308 had had the honor of being presented with a sword by the Việt Minh-Liên Việt

Front (now the Việt Nam Fatherland Front). Engraved on it was a phrase meaning: "Winning Victory Everywhere".[1]

In the ranks of the combat ready Quyết Thắng Army Corps, members of the vanguard formation organized a grand celebration of its anniversary with full formalities. The troops warmly welcomed beloved President Tôn Đức Thắng, an image of kith-and-kin South Việt Nam. After reviewing the guard of honor and attending the military parade with Uncle Tôn, I, on behalf of the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command, entrusted the troops with the following task: "... The revolution of our people has recorded great victories. The North is making steady strides along the path of socialist construction. The revolutionary struggle of the Southern compatriots and fighters has never before enjoyed such favorable conditions as at present. However, the US imperialists and their lackeys are obdurately carrying on their neo-colonialist war. The revolutionary struggle of our people will by necessity be protracted, arduous, and fierce, but final victory will be ours. We are sure to win!

"Comrades, in this important moment, make diligent efforts to build your units into regular, modern divisions. Remain ever valiant, and combat-ready, prepared to fight for great victory in every battle, succeeding gloriously in any task entrusted to you by the higher echelons, so that you will continue to be worthy of the name of Vanguard Division."

In late August 1974, the General Chief of Staff's Office concentrated its efforts on ascertaining the situation and preparing for the Politburo's meeting. I held working sessions with the Central Team in Hà Đông; present were Nguyễn Đông[2], Vũ Lăng[3], and Võ Quang Hồ[4]. We engaged in a preliminary exchange of views on the rule governing the Việt Nam people's war in different periods. And on this basis, we tried to determine the best positions

1. "Mã đáo thành công" in Vietnamese, which originally means "successes come to you as fast as a horse".
2. Head of the Office of the Military Committee.
3. Head of the Combat Operations Department.
4. Deputy Head of the Combat Operations Department.

from which to carry out our plan of action in the South during this new juncture. Upon reviewing the situation from the August 1945 Revolution up to the present time, we realized that the rule was as follows: to use revolutionary violence; to carry out people's uprisings and people's wars; to launch a revolutionary upsurge to carry out both resistance and national construction; to wage an all-out fight in all fields – military, political, economic, and diplomatic – and in all three strategic areas with overall campaigns, creative and highly effective combat ways to achieve the strategic target; and to create opportunities for fighting strategic battles, the consequences of which will decisively change the situation and enable us to win victory. The tasks of the revolution in the South after the US withdrawal did not come outside the purview of this rule. As an immediate first step, it was necessary to enumerate the ways we could oppose the South's pacification and encroachment operations, increase our effectives and firepower, and ensure that each of our local force battalions had 300 men while each of the main force battalions had 400. The North was to organize battalions and companies possessing strong firepower for dispatch to the battlefield. Regiments were instructed to take district centers and military subsectors; battalions were to destroy enemy companies. As Zones VIII and IX did not yet have a unified command, we questioned the advisability of establishing one.

The idea of attacking southern Tây Nguyên (starting with an attack on Buôn Ma Thuột) came to my mind when I reflected on my days in the anti-French resistance. I recalled the importance of Tây Nguyên's military strategic position in combination with the realities of the battlefield at that time, applying all of this to the strengths and weaknesses in the enemy's strategic arrangement. Many military experts on both sides of the conflict had said that control over Tây Nguyên meant control over the entire theater of war in Southern Indochina. Tây Nguyên was the roof of the southern part of this peninsula. The South's strategic arrangement, purported to be "strong at the two ends", was designed to enable them to cope with us in the North (Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên) and in the South (enemy Military Zones III and IV). This made it all the more apparent that Tây Nguyên was a crucial, if yet weakly controlled and insufficiently defended, area.

At a very early date during the anti-US resistance, the General Chief of Staff's Office pinpointed the enemy's weaknesses in the southern part of Tây Nguyên. While garrisoning powerful forces in Tactical Zone I (from Quảng Trị to Quảng Ngãi), in order to defend the area within the confines of the North, the enemy stationed only reasonable forces in Tactical Zone II (including Tây Nguyên). In Tây Nguyên in particular, the enemy took greater precautions against us in the North (Pleiku-Kon Tum) than in the South (Buôn Ma Thuột).

As early as mid-1973, in the initial draft of *Strategic Plan,* the Central Team proposed the following:

"The main direction from which our main forces struck was Tây Nguyên, the eastern zone that includes Quảng Trị- Thừa Thiên and Quảng Đà. We selected Tây Nguyên as our main position due to its favorable terrain and topography, the possibility of utilizing effectively technical weapons, the possibility of combining main force fighting with attacks and uprisings in the Zone V plains, the ability to engage in continuous attacks, the availability of material installations, and the comparative weakness of the enemy."

Văn Tiến Dũng and I read the document and offered feedback for the Central Team to continue its study, then amend and finalize the *Strategic Plan.*

During a working session, Hoàng Minh Thảo, whose background was that of a military science researcher, expressed the following views: Tây Nguyên has been selected as a strategic target, therefore Buôn Ma Thuột should be attacked first as it is the most populous provincial town. It is a strategic area generally, and even more so because the enemy here is very weak. The difficulties that must be resolved prior to any attack, however, are 1) a lack of reliable roads for troop movements, and 2) a shortage of water. I readily endorsed this appraisal.

A few days later, I invited Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân to a family-style dinner. At that time, our cadres were divided over the issue of whether Tây Nguyên or the Nam Bộ Delta should serve as our main direction of attack. In the course of our evening together, I told them we would strike at Tây Nguyên first.

The selection of Tây Nguyên as our main battlefield was a subject of deliberation for many other comrades. In July 1974, during a meeting in Đồ Sơn with me, Hoàng Văn Thái and Lê Trọng Tấn, Lê Duẩn raised the topic of Tây Nguyên. Lê Trọng Tấn, in response, mentioned that he had once given the following exercise to students at the senior complementary military school: "If Tây Nguyên was selected as the main target of the strategic offensive, what would be the first target?" An overwhelming majority of the students selected the southern direction, a strike on Buôn Ma Thuột.

Subsequently, Lê Hữu Đức recounted a summer morning in 1973 when First Secretary Lê Duẩn called on him to report on the military situation in the South. Before he left, Lê Duẩn asked: "What is the General Chief of Staff's Office doing?"

"We are working out a draft strategic plan for the liberation of the South."

"Can you report it to me?"

Two hours later, Đức had finished reporting on the Draft Plan. Lê Duẩn, having attentively listened to him, at last gave the following instruction: "I invite the whole team to come work with me this afternoon."

That same afternoon, Lê Trọng Tấn, Vũ Lăng, and Lê Hữu Đức arrived at Lê Duẩn's home. After hearing Tấn's report, similar in content to Đức's report that morning, Lê Duẩn said, "I have seriously considered the same strategic direction. The Central Team's report today has confirmed my own feelings on this matter. I'm ready to make a report to the Politburo."

On their way home, Tấn advised Lăng and Đức. "This is top secret material," he said. "I'd better report it directly to Dũng and Văn."

On Tuesday morning of the following week, before the start of discussions, Tấn gave an account of Dũng's and Văn's reactions to the Team. "Dũng has given instructions to strike at Buôn Ma Thuột, where the enemy is very weak. An effective strike would bring about a significant victory for us. Văn was amenable to road building, as

it is only with the existence of roads that big guns and tanks can be put to use and effective battles fought. Văn advised me to have the engineering troops build roads for an attack on Buôn Ma Thuột. Then he recalled his experiences in Điện Biên Phủ, in the north of Quảng Trị. Roads there were absolutely critical."

Obviously, the choice of Tây Nguyên (mainly its southern areas) as the strategic target, and of Buôn Ma Thuột as the first target of attack, was not a question that had been discussed only then.

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On September 27, at a working meeting of the Politburo, Lê Duẩn raised five topics to be covered in our discussions. Taken together, these were plans for the southern revolution in 1975 and afterward. They included tasks foreseen for the army, the organization of the State machinery, and cadre work, among other things. He suggested that a prominent feature in the balance of forces was the extent to which we maintain our initiative while the enemy remains weak and passive; the South's potentiality and strength had changed considerably in recent times, and might change yet again. We must find a way to combat the US and compel it to accept defeat. We would have to boost our local forces in order that they might destroy military subsectors and district centers. At the same time, our main forces had to be positioned to destroy enemy battalions or regiment-size units, wipe out the enemy's live forces from the outside to the inside, and eventually destroy divisions and launch attacks on provincial centers. Attention was also to be paid to the commando combat forces. Our strikes were to be directed at the enemy's leading agencies, military installations, airfields, harbors, communication lines. We planned in the next two years to effect a change in the balance of power, create for ourselves new strategic opportunities, and prepare to deliver a decisive blow to the enemy through general offensives and insurrections. Concentrated efforts would be made to plan and organize our forces, enumerate our combat options, and display a spirit of flexibility, dynamism and resoluteness in carrying them out.

On the basis of the Politburo directive, the General Chief of Staff's Office was to perfect the strategic plan. A new project called "A Plan for Winning Victory in the South" (bearing number 172/TG1) was completed on August 26, 1974.

During the same period, the Central Department for the South and the Military Committee for B2 sent a plan of activity for the dry season of 1974-1975 to the Central Committee and the Central Military Committee. This plan proposed ways to complete our revolutionary tasks in the South during the period from 1975 to 1976. Thus, between the Politburo, the Central Military Committee, and the battlefields, there was unity in the determination to win decisive victory within a few years. What remained for us to work out was a plan of action for winning the war in the shortest amount of time and at the smallest cost of bloodshed.

On September 30, 1974, the Politburo held a meeting at its Headquarters. It was attended by Central Military Committee members along with Võ Chí Công, who was at that time in the Capital City.

On the walls around the meeting hall, the Combat Operation Department displayed large, 1/500,000-scale military maps with markers indicating the latest military developments. Worthy of note was a map showing our troops' attack to overrun Nông Sơn point in the Thượng Đức district center, along with failed counterattacks of enemy brigades in Zone V.

Two whole days were devoted to reports such as these.

Hoàng Văn Thái evaluated the military-political devellopments in the South over the past nine months. Supported by concrete evidence, the report indicated that the enemy side had sustained a significant setback, if not defeat, in its "pacification" and encroachment attempts. The number of encroachment operations had begun to decrease. The enemy was clearly in a state of decline. Nevertheless, its army still had numerous forces, its bombardment remained active despite restricted activity, and its coercive machinery was still able to control populations in areas under its authority.

From April, the situation underwent rapid changes. The enemy was no longer able to cope with our attacks and counterattacks. It had been compelled to abandon a number of its positions in Tây Nguyên, Zone V, and eastern Nam Bộ. As a result, we had broadened our liberated zone. The morale of the South's army was very low, evidenced by a tripled desertion rate relative to 1973. The enemy was no longer able to strike at our lines of strategic transport. If the United States continued to cut its aid, the administration of the South would increasingly weaken. It was no longer possible for the United States to dispatch land forces to South Việt Nam. Even with air and naval interventions, it would not be able to save the Southern side from collapse.

Contrarily, our camp witnessed a popular movement of cities and towns to oppose the US-Thiệu clique. The liberated zone was soon consolidated. Our main force army made great progress, but still had to make improvements in both its coordinated combat and its ability to fight the enemy, which was now retrenched behind its fortifications. In the battle of Thượng Đức, we managed to cleanly wipe out the enemy. Support dispatches to the battlefield were being pursued, but these needed to be enhanced for the near future, especially 1975. A new report proposed recruiting an additional 150,000 fighters in late 1974, with another 60,000 in early 1975, in order to have enough forces to see our plan for victory reach fruition. Although these recruitment numbers represented a very high proportion of the population, we could not afford to seek a lesser amount.

Lê Trọng Tấn proceeded, expounding on the draft of our strategic plan for the next two years, with a focus on 1975. He explained the need to complete our liberation of the South over the period from 1975-1976.

The strategic plan provided for two stages:

Stage one, slated for 1975, called for the launching of surprise, widespread offensives, the aims of which were as follows:

1. Foil the enemy's "pacification" plan. Wipe out or break down important divisions in its army. Liberate and establish

control over significant areas of the Mekong Delta, the various approaches to Sài Gòn, and the plains of Zone V and Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên.

2. Open strategic corridors from southern Tây Nguyên to eastern Nam Bộ, and in three provinces in the southern part of Zone V, including the areas from Tây Ninh to the northern approach of Sài Gòn; from Tây Ninh to Long An and the southern part of Sài Gòn; and from Kiến Phong and Kiến Tường to Mỹ Tho. Build strategic springboards for access to urban agglomerations and important enemy bases.

3. Destroy a significant portion of the enemy's war facilities. Damage its economic potential. Cut enemy communications.

4. Provide a strong impetus for urban areas to support and further our revolutionary movement.

5. Build up strategic forces. Consolidate the liberated zone. Prepare the battlefield. Create favorable conditions generally for implementation of the second stage.

The 1975 strategic plan was divided into three waves.

Wave one, carried out in the Mekong Delta and eastern Nam Bộ from December 1974 to February 1975, was a series of moderate attacks.

Wave two followed from March to June 1975. This was to be the main wave, one which would open a large-scale offensive campaign on the southern Tây Nguyên battlefield, and a coordination campaign in eastern Nam Bộ, in the northern part of Zone V, and in Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên. In the Mekong Delta, we would carry out strategic offensives and insurrections, open liberated breaches, and attempt to foil additional "pacification" operations.

Wave three took place from August to October 1975. The purpose of this wave was to intensify military activity in Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên and in Zone V. At the same time, we would prepare our forces to carry out the opportunity plan.

Stage two, scheduled for 1976, planned for the launching of general offensives and uprisings with an aim to completely liberate the South.

With regard to our strategic orientation and the tasks in specific battlefields, the General Chief of Staff's Office made the following proposals:

- Quảng Trị -Thừa Thiên and Quảng Đà were to serve as the main battlefields from which attempts to foil the enemy's "pacification" campaigns would be carried out. It was from these places as well that we would destroy enemy forces, liberate major parts of rural areas, and implement our strategy of dividing the enemy into portions, thereby rendering them weak and ineffective.

-Tây Nguyên (its southern part, mostly) was the principle battlefield for our main forces' attempts at wiping out the enemy.

- Nam Bộ. The Mekong Delta and suburban areas of Sài Gòn were to be the main theaters from which we would strike at the South's "pacification" campaign. Our design was to completely encircle and isolate Sài Gòn.

The Eastern area of the South was the battleground for our main forces to destroy the enemy, open liberated breaches, open the corridors of Tây Ninh and, in coordination with Zone VIII, Kiến Phong-Kiến Tường. This would create a springboard from which we could attack Sài Gòn and Mỹ Tho.

The General Chief of Staff's Office anticipated that strategic opportunities might arise in the following three situations:

1. In 1975, when we launched our strongest attacks during the second wave.

2. During the rainy season of 1975 in Nam Bộ.

3. In the last months of 1975 when the enemy was organizing presidential elections.

Our guiding principle was "to contain the Americans, topple the puppet-leadership, conduct the war within the territory of the South, while standing ready to cope with an intense, large-scale US

reaction in the form of air and naval attacks and the deployment of fire brigades".

In its report, the General Chief of Staff's Office also expounded on a concrete plan involving strategic logistics and targets to be achieved, especially for 1975. Moreover, the report dealt with the possibility of US re-intervention as a reaction to our launching of large-scale attacks; our own material and technical capacity for increased, broader-based warfare; and the possibility of instigating mass insurrections in towns and cities, especially Sài Gòn.

The South's administration had been seriously weakened. Not only was dissension with the American side on the increase, but it was also being confronted with insurmountable socio-economic problems. The United States found itself in an embarrassing situation. On its own soil, the anti-war movement had gained momentum since the signing of the Paris Agreement. Inflation was prevalent in the US. The Republican Party was bound hand and foot by the Watergate scandal. The outlook was bleak for the United States to bring troops back to South Việt Nam. Objectively, this was a most favorable condition for us, one that we would take advantage of without fail.

The enemy's difficulties proved favorable to us. The revolution in South Việt Nam was on the upsurge. The Nam Bộ battlefield entered an unprecedented rainy season. Disregarding difficult weather conditions, our army and people stepped up activities in various areas, creating new potentialities and new forces, both material and spiritual. We had wiped out a fairly substantial part of the enemy's forces, and managed to maintain our "liberated enclaves" in the Mekong Delta and around Sài Gòn. We were also successful in preserving our broad liberated zone and base areas, while continuing to pose a strategic threat to the enemy. Our preparations both of material and of reserve fighting forces were outstanding. Our logistic branch, which we called the "Trường Sơn Team", had transported tremendous quantities of supplies – tens of thousands of tons of ammunitions, food provisions, fuel, and so forth. It had also created enough additional forces with which the army could fight for as long as 18 months. We had built up our military units, especially our "main force fists", with great results.

The main force army had already been deployed in nearly every major area of South Việt Nam.

Later in the conference, I drew particular attention to the Thượng Đức battle. This battle clearly showed that the combat capacity of the South was nearly neglible at the point when, both in offence and in defence, it could no longer rely on US Air Force support and it had run out of expendable quantities of artillery shells. I went on to assert that a great strategic opportunity had presented itself to us, and we needed military-wide preparations to take advantage of it. And while stepping up our political struggle, we would have to continue initiating strategic battles to destroy enemy effectiveness and win total victory.

Trường Chinh pointed out that the United States had two alternatives: either change horses in mid-stream, as it had done formerly with Ngô Đình Diệm, or ride it all the way to the far shore and carry out limited intervention to save the situation. Our side clearly understood the need to avail itself of the United States' predicament.

Phạm Văn Đồng recalled his meeting with Kissinger earlier in the year. He had posed this question to the American diplomat: "The Vietnamese nation vanquished the Yuan troops on three separate occasions. So tell me, how many times will you attack us?" After Kissinger raised one finger, Phạm Văn Đồng added, "The United States has embarrassed itself. American troops would not dare return to Việt Nam."

Nguyễn Duy Trinh suggested that we move forward, but with caution.

Everybody agreed that once the United States had withdrawn its troops, it would be difficult for it to return to South Việt Nam. A land force intervention would by all accounts be risky, while an air force intervention would not decisively impact the battlefield. How could it save the South? No matter the extent to which it might intervene, it could not save the South from collapse. We had seized the initiative on the battlefield and created solid strategic positions from North to South. Our military forces, and our material reserves, had been increased. Our system of strategic and

campaign roads was being completed. In southern towns and cities, the movement for peace, a better livelihood, democracy, national independence, and the overthrow of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was developing. The role of the National Liberation Front, that of the Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces were being enhanced. Obviously, the enemy had been seriously weakened in all facets of its war campaign. In the South, we were already stronger than the enemy.

With regard to our strategic plan, the conference determined that the years 1975 and 1976 were important to our war aims; but 1975 was a hinge year that would see conditions created in areas that were critical for winning final victory in 1976. In 1975, we started an attack on southern Tây Nguyên; this was carried out in combination with the opening of liberated breaches in the Mekong Delta and the linking of Tây Nguyên with eastern Nam Bộ. The plan for 1975 must be flawlessly executed in order that the plan for 1976 would work. We had to create a surprise element we could employ to further along these positive developments.

As far as developments with the United States were concerned, we understood the need to achieve a combination with the diplomatic struggle so as to rule out the possibility of its re-intervention. It was also necessary to work out specific plans to guard against a resumption of US air and naval strikes, especially when South Việt Nam was confronted by the threat of collapse.

The revolutionary situation was ripening. A final test of strength with our enemy would have to occur; the total collapse of the army and administration in the South seemed inevitable.

The conference approved the seventh draft of our fundamental strategic plan, which had been prepared by the General Chief of Staff's Office. This version of the plan stressed the need to create opportunities for our revolution and to seize them, especially with the imminent fall of Nguyễn Văn Thiệu; "If an opportunity emerged at the beginning or at the end of 1975", the plan stated, "we would at once liberate the South in 1975."

The conference decided on two areas from which we needed to effect our battle strategy. As a result, our main forces had to make

military preparations for both fronts: Tây Nguyên, with stress being laid on southern areas of the region; and Eastern Nam Bộ.

Tây Nguyên had been chosen as the main battlefield for our major offensive in 1975.

Regarding combat strategies and tactics, it was necessary to integrate our military and political struggles. We would combine the three thrusts of attack (military and political, with agitation incited among enemy troops); and we would attack the enemy in all three strategic areas (mountainous and forest areas, rural delta areas, and urban areas). In step with the overall campaign in the Mekong Delta and Zone V, our main force army must record decisive enemy defeats on the harsh battlefields of the forests and mountains. Efforts must be made to dissect the military body of our enemy, cutting his communications and creating conditions for outbreaks of separatist movements and military putsches.

On the morning of October 8, 1974, the First Secretary concluded the conference. He pointed out that after seven days of discussion, the Politburo, Central Military Committee, and the comanders of various sectors had reached a historical agreement: the time had come to make a decision on accomplishing the national democratic revblution in the South.

The First Secretary analyzed the overall plight of the South, as well as the declining fortunes of the United States vis-a-vis the growing stock of the revolution. He continued with a comment relating to strategic opportunity: "In view of developments in the war, the Politburo has decided to bring to completion the national democratic revolution in the South." After 20 years of fighting, we finally had the opportunity to win total victory and unite Việt Nam under the cause of national liberation. Beyond this, there were no other foreseeable opportunities for us. If we allowed 10 or 15 years to elapse, the South would recover, its forces would grow stronger, and the war would once more become extremely complex. The present opportunity required a quick, thorough, and unassailable campaign.

"To carry out this strategic resolve; there must be an overall strategy of war for the people. This strategy must combine military

with political activity uprisings with offensives and offensives with uprisings, in addition to efforts at fighting the enemy in rural areas, in the plains, and in towns and cities; to exert intense pressure on the enemy by fighting him; and to encircle and destroy him with a very strong political army and very strong armed forces.

"Our resolve is in fact as strong as an army. It is the determining force. We must plan to build and fight with a high sense of urgency and a firm resolve to win."

In conclusion, he said:

"We are resolved to mobilize the whole party, army, and people in both zones, to launch a final general offensive and general insurrection. We are further resolved to advance our revolutionary war efforts to their utmost capacity, to eliminate and dissolve the entire enemy army, to occupy Sài Gòn and all other towns and cities, to topple the South's administration at all levels, to seize control over the whole of the South, to carry out the people's democratic revolution and accomplish the final, irrefutable reunification of Việt Nam. From this very moment, we must complete all necessary preparations, create conditions and material bases to the fullest extent possible in order to launch strong and quick attacks. We will win total victory by following through on the plans we have set forth for the years 1975-1976. This opportunity allows no indecision, no hesitation."

The conference resounded with thunderous applause.

In the atmosphere of shared enthusiasm and resolve, I stood up and made this pledge to the Party: "The entire army will, at any cost, resolutely carry out the historic task entrusted to us by the First Secretary ."

Opening the first, still-blank page of our workbook, I wrote in large letters: "Strategic resolve. A historic, determined fight". In the memorable month of September 1974, we all had the greatest of resolve.

The ten-day meeting of the Politburo and Central Military Committee marked a milestone in the guidance process of the Supreme Command during the final stage of the war. One year

after the implementation of the strategic orientation, laid down in the 21st Resolution of the Central Committee, the battlefield underwent rapid changes that were by all accounts favorable to us. This was the moment when our leadership initiated discussions on strategic resolve and a number of other fundamental issues related to our decision-making process.

Developments on the Southern battlefield had supplied us with important data. The Thượng Đức battle had been a measure of the combat capacity of both our troops and those of the South. The pull-out of Tống Lê Chân was the trumpet sounding the withdrawal of demoralized enemy troops. Nixon's quitting the seat of US President was a manifestation of the impotent state of our aggressor.

All these factors enabled the Supreme Command to draw steel-like conclusions. These included:

- On the Southern battlefield, we were developing strategic initiatives while driving the enemy into a passive, defensive position.

- Our combat capacity was markedly greater than that of the South's mobile main forces.

- The United States could not re-deploy its troops to Việt Nam, making it difficult for it to save the South from defeat.

- Strategic opportunities were fast growing ripe.

After the conference, I directed the General Chief of Staff's Office to amend the plan. At the same time, I had the military tasks and plan, initially approved by the Politburo, conveyed to our various battlefields. Surprisingly, we encountered serious difficulties in the realm of troop recruitment. Army enlistment throughout Việt Nam already accounted for over 50% of all young men between the ages of 18 and 25. Meanwhile, the recruitment of 170,000 more troops in 1975 (an increase of 50% over 1973 and 1974 figures) represented a high, yet imperative number. I requested that whatever the circumstance, there must be enough combat forces to win victory, even if the additional recruitment might be in the 26-30 age bracket and in part, too, among students

and civil servants. With regard to logistics, I stressed that this, in particular, was an issue of paramount importance. Preparations must be made for 1975 and 1976 – for at least one and a half years – for the simple reason that an army lacking rice, ammunitions, and – fuel could not fight large, sustained battles. Strategic roads needed to be completed prior to the dry season for use in carrying transport to Lộc Ninh. At the same time, plans were made for the development of a network of campaign roads leading to prospective targets of attack. We determined that our system of storehouses and stations, and our transport plan as well, must be deployed in an integrated fashion.

I also requested the General Political Department to carry out ideological work for political mobilization on the battlefield. From our experience with the 1968 Tết Mậu Thân general offensives and uprisings, this work brought into play its effect, and effectively mobilized the offensive spirit of the South Vietnamese people and their army. It provided information, encouraged the Northern rear area to focus its attention on the rear area and coordinate with our forces in the South to fight the enemy. Along with the news and the communique of victory, the military insights of Quyết Thắng, Cửu Long, and Chiến Trường were broadcast through various channels of the mass media. At once it inspired the whole country, induced all hearts to share the single will to rise up and to attack, to be determined to fight, and to win.

*Chapter IV*

# MAKING STRATEGIC DECISIONS

After the October 1974 meeting, the Politburo, deeming it necessary to seek additional time to assess the situation more carefully, suggested further discussions. They stressed the need to develop a more complete strategic plan, with more extensive scientific grounding, in order to better ensure our victory. They decided to convene an enlarged meeting on December 18, 1974 to adopt a final decision on strategy.

In early December, Phạm Hùng, Trần Văn Trà, Phan Văn Đáng (Nam Bộ), Võ Chí Công, and Chu Huy Mân (Zone V) were all in Hà Nội. The General Chief of Staff's Office and I held working meetings with them to get their views from the battlefield with regard to strategic planning, the direction from which we should carry out strategic offensives, and suggested targets of attack.

Everyone expressed agreement on the strategic plan for 1975-1976. There remained two main battlefields under discussion in terms of locating our strategic military operations. Our first choice was Tây Nguyên; our second was eastern Nam Bộ. In Tây Nguyên, we would attack only Đức Lập to open a way to eastern Nam Bộ. On the subject of the target of attack, a discussion took place between the General Chief of Staff's Office and the group of B2 cadres over the Zonal Command's combat plan at the start of the 1974-75 dry season. The B2 comrades, with combat experience getting information on the enemy's immediate situation, advocated an attack first on Đồng Xoài, the district center and a key position in Phước Long province, then a strike at Phước Long to win a resounding initial victory. The General Chief of Staff's Office, in view of our serious shortage of ammunitions (especially big shells), supported attacks on Bù Đăng and Bù Na, two important positions north of Đồng Xoài, in order to obtain

additional shells – war booty after the attack on Đồng Xoài. Finally, an agreement was reached on the strike plan with our attack targets being Bù Đăng, Bù Nà, Đồng Xoài and Phước Long, although this last target was not initially considered for attack by the General Chief of Staff's Office.

Members of the Politburo, the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command concurred with the afore-mentioned plan and strike targets. Consequently, the B2 dry season plan was not displaced.

Though a long time ago, I still remembered bringing Trần Văn Trà to Sơn Tây to visit an artillery unit. It was rainy and cold that day, and our car had to cross many muddy, nearly impassable roads. Our unit troops, with their "bronze feet and steel shoulders", cordially welcomed us.

Knowing that Trà needed artillery for B2, I showed him a stockpile of 76.2 mm and DKZ 57 mm guns and said, "We are prepared to offer you these."

"How much does one of these weigh?" Trà asked.

"Two hundred kilograms," I said. "But don't worry. It would be dismantled, loaded on canoes, then carried on our men's shoulders.

Trà happily contemplated the artillery pieces. I understood the feelings of the B2 Commander. He was an eager proponent of attacking Phước Long and had repeatedly proposed the use of artillery during the 1974-1975 dry season. Thanks to his ardor and the proposal of the B2 Group, Lê Duẩn and the Military Committee agreed that B2 would be allowed to use a company of 130 mm guns in the Phước Long battle.

I took this opportunity to explain the intention of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee to keep secret our strategic design, which was that we would not yet allow the appearance of tanks and heavy guns in eastern Nam Bộ to take advantage of our surprise element. If additional artillery was to be used, advice of the Army High Command would be sought. Furthermore, heavy guns and tanks must be used thriftily; since the signing of the Paris Agreement, both the Soviet Union and China had stopped

dispatching artillery to us. After firing, the 105 mm and 130 mm shells had to be fitted for reuse.

Our various battlefields clearly comprehended this situation, especially Military Zone V. Since August 1974, Trà had telegrammed us with updates on B2's heavy gun shell situation. The forecast at that time was that by the end of the year, in the main force units and the storehouses within the zone, there would remain only 4,800 120-mm mortar shells, 1,190 160-mm mortar shells, 6,500 130-mm shells, and 300 105-mm shells. Trà also proposed that the Army High Command step up their dispatch of big-calibre shells to B2 at the beginning of the dry season.

The visit to the artillery unit left me with a good impression. On our return to Hà Nội, I pondered over the use of artillery in the final stage of the war. I recollected pages of military history on the role of artillery from Napoleon to Stalin, Jukov, and Peng Dehuai. I thought back to our use of artillery during the historic Điện Biên Phủ campaign. Nobody can deny the decisive role that artillery plays in important battles. The problems facing us now, however, were when to use it, how to transport it to the battlefield, and, especially, how to determine and find supplies of the required amount of ammunition.

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Since the October 1974 Politburo meeting, the potentialities and strength of the revolution in the South had greatly increased. Along with the birth of an army corps, the main forces of the military zones experienced rapid growth. Our local troops, militias and guerillas had grown stronger. Since July 1974, we had launched several attacks on the enemy's peripheral line from Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên to Nam Bộ.

On three occasions within the next six months, the armed forces of the Quảng Trị- Thừa Thiên military area, Military Zone V and Army Corps II recorded successive victories on the Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên-Huế and Quảng Nam-Đà Nẵng battlefields. With victory in the Thượng Đức Campaign, our troops destroyed part of the

South's live forces, broadened the Quảng Đà liberated zone, and created an important springboard for attack that threatened Đà Nẵng from the southwest. In our La Sơn and Mỏ Tàu victories, we inflicted heavy losses on the enemy's Division 1, its strongest in Military Zone I. We also broadened the liberated area south of Thừa Thiên, created a second springboard for attack, and threatened the South's strategic communications between Huế and Đà Nẵng. With our four-month defence of Thượng Đức we preserved another important springboard while destroying an enemy paratrooper division that was considered "the trump card" of the South's general strategic reserve forces.

In Tây Nguyên, our troops occupied the military subsectors – district centers of Măng Đen and Măng Bút (Kontum) and annihilated enemy main forces in Chư Nghé and Đắc Pét.

In eastern Nam Bộ, we liberated abroad area south of Highway 7, threatened the provincial town of Bình Dương and the Đồng Dù Base and Headquarters of enemy Military Corps 3 in Biên Hòa. In the Mekong Delta, Military Zone IX stepped up attacks on the enemy with plans to create a potentiality for large-scale, zone-wide offensives in early 1975. These efforts would enable them to destroy, or compel the withdrawal of, hundreds of enemy positions while liberating 4,000 hamlets consisting of 800,000 people. Military Zone VIII, after a period of difficulty, surged up to recover Zone IV of Kiến Tường, broadened the liberated area of Đồng Tháp Mười (Plain of Reeds), destroyed many enemy posts, and liberated over 200 hamlets.

In implementation of the December 19, 1972 Resolution of the Central Military Committee, the strategies and logistics of our various battlefields strongly unfolded the preparations according to the three-year plan (1973-75) in anticipation of potential war developments. The liberated zone was strengthened and consolidated, and initial efforts were made to supply logistical supplies on the spot. Transport and communication routes were built. Campaign logistic bases were rearranged. We destroyed or compelled the withdrawal of enemy positions which had controlled the eastern Trường Sơn corridor. Moreover, we opened strategic transport routes across the Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên

battlefield, Zone V, and from Tây Nguyên to Lộc Ninh. The total length of the network of military transport roads was calculated at 16, 790 km, with six north-south axes on both the eastern and western sides of the Trường Sơn range; this network facilitated force movements as well as the dispatch of supplies to the battlefield. Also, a system of oil pipelines was established from the North to eastern Nam Bộ.

Our victories on the battlefield further altered the balance of power. The General Chief of Staff's Office reported to the Central Military Committee the following strategic assessment:

"The combat capacity of our mobile main forces is markedly superior to that of the enemy's mobile main forces. The war has entered its final stage. The balance of power has changed, and we now find ourselves stronger than our enemy. Consequently, we must shift from attacks launched for the sole purpose of wiping out the enemy's live forces to strikes aimed at destroying the enemy's live forces, liberating people, and gaining and holding land. Our main forces must shift their focus from destroying enemy main forces in forests and mountainous areas to wiping out the enemy and liberating populations and lands in confined areas, the plains and urban centers".

In the North, our people recorded notable results implementing the 1974-75 plan for economic restoration and development. Efforts were made in the fields of industry, agriculture, communications and transport. Living conditions were stable. The North dispatched to the frontline 264,000 men and nearly 500,000 tons of war materials including weapons, fuel, medicines, food and foodstuffs. Our main force army made headway in combat training and was ready to fight at a moment's notice.

On the morning of December 10, at my request, the Military Intelligence Department convened to the Headquarters to discuss the latest developments in Tây Nguyên.

At the beginning of the session, I advised Phan Bình, Head of the Military Intelligence Department, to make a concise report as the Military Committee had no time to hear one of great length. Time is now strength.

Phan Bình introduced Nguyễn Thanh, Head of Bureau 70[1], as the speaker. After reviewing measures to cope with our Winter-Spring 1975 activities, which had been put forward by Nguyễn Văn Thiệu at a meeting held at the beginning of the month, Nguyễn Thanh mapped out the disposition of enemy forces in Tây Nguyên according to the latest information. In north Tây Nguyên, he explained, the enemy had sent Regiment 47 from the plains of Zone V, along with Commando Intergroup 4 in Sài Gòn, to reinforce Pleiku; the South had established the Kontum Field Command to take direct control over four Commando Intergroups: 6, 21, 22, and 23. The enemy had set up the Pleiku - Quảng Đức Command to place under its direct authority the three regiments of Division 23 and the three Commando Intergroups 4, 24, and 25. The primary role of Division 23 was to defend Pleiku. In southern Tây Nguyên, only Regiment 53 of Division 23 was stationed in Buôn Ma Thuột, and only Commando Intergroup 24 was garrisoned in Quảng Đức (under authority of Division 23's light command). Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was establishing three brigades of the general reserves in Sài Gòn and mustering the entire Paratroop Division in Đà Nẵng; two mobile, division-sized strategic blocs were thus formed in two areas, ready to set out and assist us.

While listening to the report, I studied the map containing the disposition of enemy forces and then requested additional information. Following this, I concluded: "It is clear. The enemy's forces have been dispersed and thinned out. Their strategic mobile forces are encountering difficulties because the general reserve divisions are linked to the battlefields; there is a sharp contradiction between dispersal and concentration. The South's army is now demoralized and destabilized. In particular, the internal political crisis in the United States and the notable reduction of US aid have deeply affected the South's army and administration. These factors are like a smoldering fire that will burst into flames and burn the enemy down when the first spark of opportunity arises."

1. Bureau 70 gathered all information sources of the Military Intelligence Department, then selected, analyzed, and synthesized them to report to higher levels of command.

Turning to Lê Ngọc Hiền, Deputy General Chief of Staff, I added: "Be aware, the Tây Nguyên area is crucial. The enemy has mustered extensive forces throughout northern Tây Nguyên; yet he also has many weaknesses here. Anti-war sentiment has taken a firm hold in the US, even in the Congress. It would not be easy for US troops to return after their initial pull-out. However, the Department II must closely follow the activities of the US air and naval forces."

There were more facts and data to help the Supreme Command make a strategic decision.

On December 18, 1974, the Politburo convened an enlarged meeting at its Headquarters. The flat-roofed house had been the site of many secret meetings between the Politburo and the Central Military Committee; hidden under thick foliage, with solid shelters spread around, this house was to witness a historic, truly significant event. For the final time, the Party was making plans and asserting its resolve to win full-scale victory.

In addition to members of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, commanders of various battlefields and Deputy Heads of the General Chief of Staff's Office in charge of combat operations were present.

The strategic bodies of the Party, the army and the State had worked night and day, bringing fully into play their functions as strategic advisers in order to draft plans and supply information. The Politburo and Central Military Committee reflected on issues raised in the October 1974 meeting and on those which had arisen since then. Representatives from various battlefields brought to the table new information, assessments, recommendations and exigencies.

The First Secretary opened the meeting. Visibly gladdened, he made clear that the purpose of the current meeting was to discuss and make a final decision on strategy .He requested everybody to make reports on the situation, carry out discussions with a view to correctly implement the decisions taken, and not fear the loss of time.

On behalf of the General Chief of Staff's Office, Lê Ngọc Hiền expounded on the draft plan of military activities in 1975. This was the eighth draft that had been worked out on the basis of the plan the Politburo adopted in October; there were a number of amendments which had been agreed on by the representatives of various battlefields.

The report did not yet meet the requirements of the leaders, although it had been re-worked many times. Hoàng Văn Thái had voluntarily joined the enterprise, but still the requirements were not satisfied. The report's problems were explained rather vaguely. It was suggested that a section regarding the current situation dealt rather too heavily on the military side, failing to take satisfactory account of political, economic and social developments. The situation in southern towns and cities had yet to be fully understood. The 1976 military plan had not been clearly defined. B2 comrades still had doubts because no mention had been made of an attack on Đồng Xoài. On the direction of strategic attack, some expressed the desire for an attack on Đức Lập to open the way to eastern Nam Bộ.

On behalf of the Central Military Committee, I suggested that, in discussing our plan for 1975-76, we needed to understand better the requirements of our strategic decision. We must show firm resolve. In 1972, we created a good opportunity for ourselves on the Quảng Trị battlefield. At that time, Huế was in disarray and the enemy's battle position in Military Zone I had been shaken up. However, we only sent a normal-sized force across the Quảng Trị River as the roads were impassable and our technical requirements had not been met. For these reasons, the enemy, able to recover its battle position, brought in a paratroop division and marines division and staged a counterattack to reoccupy the Ancient Citadel.

The opportunity might arise at a normal level at the start. But if we availed of it in an appropriate way, we could create a new one at a higher level and develop it into a suddenly emerging opportunity. When we speak of making effective use of strategic opportunities, we mean that we must keep powerful strategic reserves ready, and have a combat plan for which its requirements can be fully met for implementation.

The 1975-76 military plan called for engagement in large- scale battles in southern Tây Nguyên through strikes aimed at enemy marching columns. We would need to wipe out three to five enemy divisions in a neat, powerful drive, one which should not be protracted. The plan emphasized that the enemy must be wiped out in Tây Nguyên, starting with an attack on Buôn Ma Thuột. It was possible that after the fall of Buôn Ma Thuột, the enemy would be in disorder, and we would have an opportunity to liberate Huế. If we came late, were weary, and allowed the situation in Tây Nguyên to develop until the rainy season, our opportunity would be lost. Therefore, we must immediately work out a plan of encircling and splitting up the enemy. We must not allow him to regroup and withdraw either to eastern Nam Bộ or in an easterly direction along the Central Vietnamese coast. Army Corps 1 did not need to be moved out this year, but was to remain concentrated, given good training, and kept constantly ready. If an opportunity arose, Army Corps 1 would be put to use. In case an opportunity did not arise, however, we would be all the stronger by waiting for it.

We must actively create opportunities for ourselves rather than passively wait for them. We must actively develop our strong points, while exacerbating the weaknesses and augmenting the mistakes of our enemy. Our decision, as well as our resolve, to undertake a national democratic revolution in 1975-76 was sound. But forethought must be given to the possibility of an opportunity for victory emerging sooner, in 1975, or perhaps even later, in 1977. By doing so, we would maintain our advantage.

During our discussions, Văn Tiến Dũng reported on developments in our military forces, making it clear that the draft plan's combat strategies required clarification and closer attention to detail. At present, we were stressing the importance of winning victory in the plains. To ensure our army's greater solidity, and to make it possible to build forces in the plains while undertaking large-scale combat operations, there must be a corridor linking the plains to the base area. Our main forces in the eastern zone must coordinate with each other to carry out this task.

In our plans for the second wave, we had to study combat approaches that would enable us to shatter the enemy without

using heavy forces. Consideration must be given to an eventual reaction by the United States. We had not ruled out the possibility of the South's quick collapse. We realized that an opportunity would emerge once we had launched attacks and the movement in towns and cities had surged. Precisely at that moment, we knew, vigilance would be as important as ever.

Deliberating over each word, and taking his time with each idea, Phạm Văn Đồng analyzed our strategic combat methods over the last stage of the war. He stressed the need to execute an effective, overall strategy and make careful preparations materially and technically. He also dealt with the training of recruits. "On our side," he said, "the emergence of a revolutionary upsurge in the South is of utmost importance. This upsurge must be very new, both militarily and politically. Military force, to its maximum capacity, must be combined with political force..." He suddenly stood and paced around the room, then stopped in his tracks and said: "We need not wait until 1976 for the South to collapse! Developments toward victory may be swifter than we've thought!"

Trường Chinh described the particular features of the situation and explained the tasks of the two zones, then went on to analyze the combat strategy previously discussed. He endorsed the plan of the Standing Board of the Central Military Committee to select Tây Nguyên as our main combat area and Buôn Ma Thuột as our first target.

"The South is weakening rapidly ," he said, "and cannot resolve the incongruity between preserving lands and populations and launching mobile combat operations. We are stronger than them in all fields. We have gained the initiative on the battlefield. In 1974, we achieved our plan. With the eventual destruction of Phước Long, we will become even stronger. We must create conditions enabling us to carry out strategically devastating blows – not just a single blow ."

Lê Đức Thọ proceeded to analyze the possible strategic aims of the United States; the opportunity; the balance of forces between the South and ourselves; the on-going struggle against "pacification" attempts; the destruction of the South's main forces; the building of localities; the mobilization toward enemy soldiers;

and the different components necessary for winning final victory in two years.

Following this, Trần Quốc Hoàn, Lê Văn Lương and Nguyễn Duy Trinh took the floor to speak about strategic measures, including the need to combine our efforts in the military, political and diplomatic spheres.

On December 22, the meeting recessed so that we could attend an important political event. On the 30th anniversary of the Việt Nam People's Army, the Party, the State and the National Assembly had decided to confer upon the people's armed forces the distinguished award of Gold Star Medal.

A demonstration of force was organized in Hà Nội Stadium amid a sea of colorful balloons, flags, and flowers. Over 30,000 people, along with representatives from various army units, were in attendance.

At 8:00 a.m., the Vietnamese national anthem was played behind a 21-gun salvo, followed by an opening address given by Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng.

Trường Chinh, Chairman of the National Assembly Standing Committee, read the commendation: "... Over the past 30 years, generation after generation of cadres and soldiers have fought for national salvation, contributed to national re-construction, and set brilliant examples of Vietnamese revolutionary heroism."

President Tôn Đức Thắng pinned a Golden Star Medal on the military flag "Quyết Thắng" (Determined to Win Victory). On behalf of the armed forces, I and Văn Tiến Dũng (General Chief of Staff), Song Hào (Head of the General Political Department), and Đinh Đức Thiện (Head of the General Department of Logistics), received with honor the distinguished award. In my address, I said with emotion: "Under the invincible banner of the Party and President Hồ Chí Minh, all cadres and solidiers in the Việt Nam People's Army, born from the people and fighting for the people, have experienced 30 years of self-construction, continuous warfare, and glorious victories. They regard each military success, each exploit of the armed forces, as having originated not only from the

leadership of the Party and President Hồ Chí Minh, but also from the boundless love and protection of our compatriots throughout the country."

With regard to our revolution in the South since the Paris Agreement was signed, I asserted, "Realities in the South over the past two years demonstrate that the collective strength of our people is an invincible force, and the revolution in the South will soon prevail. We embrace the victories of our southern compatriots and fighters, We have steel-like confidence that the revolutionary cause of the Southern people, although protracted, hard, and fiercely fought, is certain to win victory. The South will achieve complete liberation, and Việt Nam will undoubtedly be reunified. Our compatriots in the South and the North will surely be reunited under the same roof."

The ceremony ended with a parade of representatives from various military branches of the people's army, and from militias and self-defence forces, marching past the rostrum. On behalf of the authors of the "Air Điện Biên Phủ Victory", Deputy General Chief of Staff Phùng Thế Tài marched ahead, carrying aloft the "Determined to Win Victory" flag which shone with the Gold Star Medal.

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On the following day, the Politburo meeting continued.

At that time, realities on the battlefield were developing more rapidly than had been forecasted in the strategic combat plan drafted by the General Chief of Staff's Office in the October 1974 Politburo meeting.

In the 1974-75 dry season offensive, our troops recorded numerous victories in eastern Nam Bộ and Zone IX. Successive victory reports flowed in, confirming our superior position and the enemy's continued decline.

On December 13, 1974, our troops attacked the Bù Đăng military sub zone and Bù Na important area; in an additional

attack on the system of enemy posts along Highway 14, the Highway 14 – Phước Long campaign was commenced. After five days of fierce fighting, we had come to occupy Bù Đăng. We had also destroyed 50 posts, liberated 14,000 people, and established our control over 80 km of Highway 14.

On December 20, the Army High Command received a message from Lê Đức Anh, Deputy Head of the Zonal Command: "On Highway 14, we completely liberated the area from Bridge 11 near Đồng Xoài, and past Bù Đăng to the confines of the Kiến Đức subzone. In Bù Đăng, Vinh Thiện and Bù Na, we captured four artilleries and 7,000 shells, over 3,000 various kinds of rifles, and took more than 300 prisoners. Our pursuits will continue".

The concern over a shortage of shells, which had been weighing heavily on my mind for some time, was now alleviated!

In the splendor of victory, the battlefield continued to find new ways of expanding it. On December 27, the High Command received a message, signed Năm Thạch, from the Command of Army Corps 4: "We attacked the Đồng Xoài subzone at 5h35 on December 26. By 8h30 we had complete control over it."

Năm Thạch was the pseudonym of Hoàng Cầm, Commander of Army Corps 4. In the joy of victory, I recalled the image of this military cadre who had consistently revealed his impressive character and talent since the Trần Hưng Đạo Campaign (1951). At that time, in his capacity as a battalion commander in Brigade 312, the Army High Command conferred on him the title of "model cadre". Battalion Commander Nguyễn Hùng Sinh of Brigade 308 received the same distinction that year.

Following the annihilation of the Đồng Xoài military subzone, our troops succeeded in encircling and isolating the provincial town of Phước Long. In a further sign of weakness, the enemy reacted with an ineffective bombing and strafing raid.

During the meeting, Phạm Hùng and Trần Văn Trà requested that the First Secretary and the Central Military Committee approve the liberation of Phước Long through the deployment of a tank

company and a 130 mm artillery company. Lê Duẩn and I immediately consented.

On December 31, Army Corps 4, under direct command of Hoàng Cầm, and reinforced by Infantry Regiment 16 and two anti-aircraft battalions, opened attack on the provincial town. Our troops overran the peripheral defence system, destroyed the Phước Bình military subzone, and occupied Bà Rá Mount. The enemy mustered enough forces to stubbornly resist the approaches to the provincial town. Enemy planes raided our military formations. In response, our Army Corps Command decided to subject targets in the main town to sustained, heavy artillery shelling; at the same time, it countered enemy plane strikes with anti-aircraft fire. Bypassing the peripheral resistance nests, our troops penetrated deeply enough to attack the important targets. At 19h00 on January 6, 1975, the entire provincial city of Phước Long was liberated.

After 26 days of continuous fighting, the Highway 14- Phước Long campaign came to a victorious end. The enemy chose not to continue fighting in desperation, even after all its rescue columns were repulsed. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu sadly called for "three days of mourning and prayers for Phước Long".

The Phước Long victory heralded a dry season full of good prospects and infused our hearts with excitement. Our meeting took a short recess. Attendants merrily shook hands with one another. In the joy of witnessing the day of victory reach nearer, each handshake contained new resolve, and the promise of strengthened commitment.

The Phước Long victory represented a significant strategic reconnaissance blow. For the first time in the South, a province – one near Sài Gòn – had been entirely liberated. We had broadened an important base area in eastern Nam Bộ, a fact that most clearly showed our new possibilities in the war. It marked a further downward turn for the South. They were no longer capable of launching large-scale operations to reoccupy important bases and provincial cities, even on the peripheral defence line around Sài Gòn-Gia Định. The Phước Long victory also illuminated the implausibility of the United States resuming its military

intervention in South Việt Nam. This development was summed up by a White House spokesman when he stated, "President Ford has no intention of violating the interdictions (of the Congress) about the use of US military forces in Việt Nam."

The realities of the battlefield showed the sound foresight and planning of the B2 comrades.

Subsequently, in the document *The Collapse of South Việt Nam,* it was written "The fall of Phước Long marked the beginning of the disintegration of South Việt Nam". Phạm Bá Hoa, the South's Colonel Chief of Staff of the General Department of Supplies, was even clearer about the significance of this defeat: "The main thing was that the Phước Long defeat had shown the potentiality and strength of the republican armed forces. Attacked on only one place, it had no forces with which to respond. And what possible chance did they have when attacked in many places? Phước Long was an event that evidenced clearly enough the effectiveness of the 'Vietnamization' policy carried out during the past six years... Phước Long may be said to have been a test of strength between the two sides, and the result of this test was clear..."

According to a report by Department II, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu chaired an urgent meeting at the Independence Palace during the fall of Phước Long. Thiệu told his generals that he would not send reinforcements to Phước Long or try to retake this province. The cost would be too high, and the army had not enough planes and reserve troops. If they want to reinforce Phước Long, he said, troops would have to be taken from other places; these troops, however, were also under threat of attack by North Việt Nam. During the meeting, Cao Văn Viên, General Chief of Staff of the Sài Gòn army, bitterly observed that the loss of Phước Long was an important beginning, for a total Communist military conquest of South Việt Nam. Obviously, he said, the North did not fear any US reaction.

The apparent US indifference further increased Sài Gòn's despair and speeded up the demoralization of its army. In a press conference held on January 14, 1975, US Defence Secretary Slesinger deliberately downplayed Phước Long.

"The present situation in South Việt Nam shows that North Việt Nam does not intend to lauch a widespread, large- scale offensive. What it wants is to weaken the South Vietnamese regime all over the country, especially to upturn the pacification policy which is being successful. Hence, what we foresee in the few months to come is only a number of major battles. At the moment, I do not foresee a major offensive as in 1972."[1]

Over half a month later, on January 22, US President Gerald Ford threw a new pail of cold water on the South's war efforts when he stated: "There is no other action than the dispatch of additional aid to Sài Gòn. There, will be no intervention in South Việt Nam if it is deemed not in keeping with the constitution and the law."[2]

In response to Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's pleas for help, he could only offer vague promises: "I share your concern about North Việt Nam's failure to comply with the most fundamental provisions of the Paris Agreement and North Vietnamese military pressures to a serious extent. I wish to assure you that our administration will create continued pressure with a view to a full implementation of the Agreement."

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The Phước Long victory was a new, important factor for our meeting to consider in its strategy to liberate the South. The guiding idea of the Politburo was to win a quicker, more expansive victory. The General Chief of Staff's Office was to base itself on the developments on the battlefield to suggest to the Politburo amendments to the combat plan in keeping with the new juncture.

As the meeting neared its conclusion, the issues we had discussed became more clearly focused.

1. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jerolt L. Schecter. Op. cit.
2. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jerolt L. Schecter. Op. cit.

Our main strategic battleground was defined as the southern part of Tây Nguyên, with our main target being Buôn Ma Thuột; these decisions marked the start of our main force offensives in 1975.

Lê Thanh Nghị[1] responded to the strategic plan by saying, "The dispatch of more forces to B2 is a prudent decision, and the sooner we do so, the better it will be. There must be general strategic reserves and specific reserves for each battlefield. By this I mean an army corps that cannot be moved to the main battlefield, if over a great distance."

Lê Đức Thọ dealt with diplomatic developments. "In 1975," he said, "diplomacy will not pose any major problems for us. Now, if we were to sit down again with the other side, perhaps talks would expand and the war would drag on. Given our comparatively weak political position, diplomacy alone will not serve us. It is necessary to coordinate fully the forces of our three fists (military, political, and diplomatic). Only by doing this can we improve the conditions we want to create for ourselves in 1976. In my view, our present situation is different from that of last year. Now it is necessary to launch attacks in quick succession, destroy significant numbers of enemy forces, win the biggest victories possible, and cause our potentiality to get stronger very quickly. As regards propaganda, we must maintain our current measures; there is no need yet to make great noise."

Lê Duẩn agreed with the above mentioned views, adding: "We are fighting on our owns terms through a combination of political and military activity, and by applying our overall 'three fists' strategy. Without doing so, it will not be possible for us to win victory ."

On the morning of January 8, 1975, First Secretary Lê Duẩn began the final day of our meeting.

During our last meeting, he said, the Politburo agreed on strategies that would deliver our anti-US resistance to total victory. In this meeting, attended by comrades from Nam Bộ

1. Deputy Prime Minister of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam.

and Zone V, we have made decisions that will enable us to complete the national democratic revolution in the South and reunify Việt Nam.

We now hold the initiative and control over our populations and lands. We have created an integrated strategic position from Quảng Trị -Thừa Thiên to the Mekong Delta; built strong and mobile main force "fists"; and created an overwhelming springboard around Sài Gòn, the most strategic position of all. All this proves we are strong. And based on our position of strength, we are preparing for full-scale victory in two more years.

Obviously, the enemy had begun to decline in all fields – military, political, and economic – due to both the effectiveness of our attacks and its own weaknesses. The enemy, we saw, might quickly slip down the slope of defeat in the forthcoming period. We recognized our advantage, along with the opportunity to intensify our revolution and thereby realize both military and political victory.

In the way of strategic combat, Lê Duẩn reviewed our need to grasp our method, with regard to launching attacks, starting uprisings, and vice-versa; to attack with three converging thrusts on three strategic areas, wipe out the enemy, secure control and march forward toward a stage of general offensives and insurrections.

Lê Duẩn, growing increasingly animated, went on. He exhorted us carry out our strategic objectives and build up our overall force. We must, he declared, create anew strength and anew potentiality, launch continuous, surprise attacks and march forward into a stage of general counteroffensives and insurrections. We must vanquish the enemy inside his own home – Sài Gòn – to end the war. We agreed with the 1975 strategic plan, expounded on by the General Chief of Staff's Office, regarding the manner in which strategic military strikes would be handled in 1975-76. In Nam Bộ there were three important tasks we specified: 1) attack in the plains, 2) use our main forces, and 3) bring pressure to bear on towns and cities: In Zone V, in Tây Nguyên, we agreed to launch strong attacks, beginning with Buôn Ma Thuột.

Finally, Lê Duẩn explained that there were still many issues to be discussed. The General Chief of Staff's Offite had a lot to do given its critical role in implementing this resolution.

The meeting fully agreed with the conclusion of the First Secretary. As a result, the Politburo issued the following historic resolution:

*"We have before us a major strategic opportunity. Never before have we had such beneficial conditions in, both the military and political spheres, or such an important strategic opportunity as now, to complete the national, democratic people's revolution in the South and march forward to the peaceful reunification of Việt Nam."*

Following this resolution, the Politburo agreed to secure full-scale efforts from the entire Party, army and people in both zones during 1975-76. In combination with diplomatic endeavors, it would intensify military and political efforts to render the balance of forces more favorable to us on the Southern battlefield. Preparations would be completed in all fields to launch general offensives and insurrections, wipe out or disintegrate the Southern army and topple its administration from a central to a local level. Power would be seized for the people in the liberation of South Việt Nam.

The resolution clarified that the year 1975 represented a series of opportunities: powerful military attacks would create them, political efforts would increase them, while developments internationally and within the United States constituted further opportunities to a sudden change with the dazzling speed.

The Politburo approved the 1975-76 strategic plan. This plan, carefully prepared since mid-1973, had already been through eight drafts with the General Chief of Staff's Office. In addition to this plan, the Politburo forecasted that if the opportunity were to arise at any time during 1975, the South would be liberated immediately, before the year's end.

On the following day, the Standing Board of the Central Military Committee met to grasp and realize the Politburo's Resolution. The meeting was attended by Võ Chí Công, Chu Huy

Mân, Lê Trọng Tấn and Hoàng Minh Thảo. The main issue was the Tây Nguyên Campaign.

Since the preparation of the 21st Plenum of the Party Central Committee, several comrades in the Army High Command and I had deliberated over the selection of Tây Nguyên as our main battlefield. The concern had been voiced by many people.

Through a series of discussions, it was confirmed that the original selection of Tây Nguyên as the main direction of attack, with Buôn Ma Thuột being the first target, was in fact necessary. I proposed the following two scenarios:

- If Buôn Ma Thuột exhibited weakness, it would be attacked at once.

- If the South sent in reinforcements and took precautions about our attacks, we would organize first a strike against the reinforcement troops in both Buôn Ma Thuột and Pleiku, then attack Buôn Ma Thuột directly.

Lê Đức Thọ arrived while we were meeting, and he quickly endorsed the prevailing view on Buôn Ma Thuột.

Tây Nguyên was an important battlefield located in a mountainous and heavily forested region. One Southern main force division was stationed there along with seven commando intergroups and four brigades of tanks and armored vehicles. The South had wrongly assessed our strategy, believing that in 1975 we were not strong enough to attack provincial towns and cities. And in case we did launch an attack, they were anticipating one in a northern direction. Consequently, they had assembled forces to defend Pleiku and Kontum, thus leaving Daklak and Buôn Ma Thuột undefended.

Southern forces here were not strong, for the most part including support troops of division and regiment size. Their numbers, we knew, thinned out toward the territory's interior. Our main difficulty was a lack of roads, and therefore the mobility of our troops was hindered. We were faced with finding an effective route for the transport of weapons and technical equipment.

Our attack on Buôn Ma Thuột caught the South off- guard. We found ourselves confronted with various possibilities for obliterating his defence system in Tactical Zone II as well as shaking Tây Nguyên and the entire Southern defence disposition. A new opportunity would be created for the implementation of the 1975-76 strategic plan.

Concluding the meeting, I recalled the Politburo's decision to select southern Tây Nguyên as the main battleground for our strategic offensive, with the first target being Buôn Ma Thuột. The attack would be subsequently shifted to the east. With regard both to our combat strategy and our deployment of forces, we must employ audacity, secrecy, a surprise element of attack, and a successful feint to divert the South's attention to northern Tây Nguyên and Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên.

In our campaign's political, ideological, and organnizational work, it was necessary for us to grasp the idea of annihilation attacks, and attach significance to the mobilization toward Southern troops. We needed to emphasize the importance of unity and corrdination among our troops, and close observation of battlefield discipline. We must also strictly comply with our policy regarding liberated areas, POW's, rallied soldiers, and the war booty. Arrangement were to be made to have sufficient reserves of strong, capable cadres, while ensuring the command of troops in continuous fighting and the availability of replenishment forces.

The specific tasks of the Tây Nguyên Campaign were clearly defined as follows:

1. To put out of action forty to fifty thousand enemy troops, and wipe out three to four regiments as well as numerous infantry intergroups and armored vehicles. To inflict heavy losses on one to two Southern main force divisions while wiping out various civil guard battalions and militia platoons. To broaden the strategic corridor from Highway 14 (via Gia Nghĩa) to Highway 20 (linking to eastern Nam Bộ) and from Tây Nguyên to the three provinces within Zone V. And to lessen the South's overall strength.

2. To liberate the population and a great portion of territory south of Pleiku and Cheo Reo, near Buôn Ma Thuột, and foil the

South's plans of "pacification", encroachment and disengagement. To preserve and develop control over the battlefield while strategically dividing Southern forces into disconnected units. To coordinate with the "anti-pacification" front in the plains. And to wipe out three to four military subzones and subsectors, in addition to one or two provincial towns.

3. To strike at communication lines and support bases, destroy substantial quantities of war materials, and seriously diminish the South's economic potential. When the opportunity arose, to cut off Highways 14, 19, and 21, with the greatest importance placed on Highway 19.

4. To develop our political efforts in provincial towns. To build up secret self-defence rings and commando organizations, wipe out the ringleaders of wicked despots, and establish positions of control at the grassroots level.

5. To build up the armed forces comprising three kinds of troops, expand the liberated zone, build roads to aid strategic transports to various battlefields, and complete all preparations for the wartime campaigns that would follow.

Under instructions of the General Chief of Staff's Office, Corps 232 was set up on the basis of the frontline Command of B2 and the zonal forces, Military Zone VIII, and reinforcements sent by the Defence Ministry.

Fidel Castro contributed a number of special-use vehicles which he had purchased from Japan, and financed the dispatch of Vietnamese technicians to Japan to study their use. Engineering groups and pioneer youth made efforts to open roads. Under the direct leadership and guidance of Đinh Đức Thiện, Phan Trọng Tuệ, and Đồng Sĩ Nguyên, a strategic network of roads on the eastern and western sides of the Trường Sơn Range was built and consolidated up to Lộc Ninh. A pipeline system to serve major battles was completed via Tây Nguyên and Zone V to eastern Nam Bộ.

Lê Ngọc Hiền arrived in Tây Nguyên to prepare plans for combat. Vũ Lăng, Commander of the Tây Nguyên Front,

received orders to travel immediately to Buôn Ma Thuột for a direct study of the battlefield. On January 24, 1975, Phạm Hùng, Trần Văn Trà and a group of B2 cadres urgently returned to the raging battlefield.

To instill in the frontline and rear area forces the determination to intensify all revolutionary efforts, and to encourage them to create for us the opportunity to reach the final stages of war, I wrote an article entitled *The Invincible Force of the Vietnamese People's War in the New Epoch.*

In the spirit of the Resolution of the 21st Plenum of the Party Central Committee, and the resolution of the Politburo and of the Central Military Committee in 1973 and 1974, this article comprehensively analyzed our people's fight under Party leadership, a fight marked by such milestones as the August 1945 Revolution; the Winter-Spring 1953-54 Campaign, with our historic Điện Biên Phủ victory; and the withdrawal of the United States with the January 1973 Paris Agreement. "Our victories over the past 30 years have been great indeed," I wrote. "The successful resolution of the problems that a small nation faces in its just war against a much larger, imperialist nation – climaxing in the Vietnamese people's insurrection and people's war – bears decisively on our people's revolution. It increases the iron-strong confidence of our army and people in the Party's leadership, and in the prospect of victory for our country. It provides valuable experience that will enable us, as a country, to complete the people's national democratic revolution and defend the socialist North. We shall prepare simultaneously for the long-term defence of our country and the defeat of imperialist enemies, however strong they may be, in whatever wars of aggression they insist on waging."

Delving deeply into the causes of victory, the article highlighted such fundamental factors as our Party's leadership, the political grounds for the Vietnamese people's war (independence, freedom and socialism), and the strength of the people in their fight against the enemy. It detailed other factors as well, including: the new socialism; the new- type armed forces; wartime conduct strategies; the creative military art of people's war; and the

international climate of this new era. Applying the Party's specific philosophies and ideologies to the people's war, the article described the objectives not only of our enemy but also of the people in both the South and the North in the face of our resolute forward march toward final victory.

The newspapers *Nhân dân* (People) and *Quân đội nhân dân* (People's Army) published the full article over part of their front page and all of their second. Both the Voice of Việt Nam Radio and Liberation Radio devoted special broadcasts to convey the article's ideas throughout the entire country.

Time is strength. In the present, critical moment, this concept bears a deeper, more significant meaning than ever. In military spheres, the concepts of "certain victory" and "swiftness", circumspection and audacity always go together in a harmonious, dialectical way. Based not only on estimations of the balance of power between the South and ourselves, but also on the realities of the battlefield and conditions both domestically and internationally, the Politburo made a new strategic decision. Since the beginning of 1973, after two years of analysis and preparation, reflections on a plan for the liberation of the South had developed into a formal resolution: we would mobilize and organize forces nationwide to complete our national, democratic revolution no later than 1975.

The Party's resolution was sound, and could not have been made any earlier or later than this moment. The situation in the final stage of a war always develops very quickly, and with the possibility of sudden change. The efforts of our army and people caused the situation to evolve even more quickly (often more quickly than expected). Strategic opportunities usually emerge very quickly, never pausing as they develop. But we must detect these opportunities before they pass, seizing them to win victory on the largest scale possible. To act slowly and quickly at one and the same time – such was our Party's ingenuity in the war between late 1974 and early 1975.

The Party's strategic resolutions derived from 45 years of revolutionary experience and achievement. A small nation battling an imperialist megalith like the United States must know how to

pursue victory on a tireless, step-by-step basis. One victory lays the foundation for subsequent ones. As time goes on, victories multiply and expand. Pondering how to end a war takes shape right from the start.

Our strategic resolutions also resulted from preparations made with courage, creativeness, and perseverance in the areas of politics, diplomacy and the military. With respect to men, weapons, vehicles, material installations, techniques, potentiality and people's will, production and fighting, economy and national defence, communications and transport, preparations were made with the potential of both the rear areas and the frontline, latent and lively throughout many years.

Once our strategic resolutions were amended and approved, they were implemented with the utmost urgency. Our march toward final victory could not be carried out at normal speed; rather, it was a flight we undertook, a race against time and our enemy.

After having driven out the Americans, the time had finally come to strike a decisive blow against the South. It would be done in accordance with Uncle Hồ's military thinking.

The whole country marched as one to the front. All for our Southern kith and kin.

*Chapter V*

# BLOW AT A NEURALGIC POINT

By decision of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee, Văn Tiến Dũng was sent to Tây Nguyên along with Đinh Đức Thiện, Head of the General Department of Logistics, Lê Ngọc Hiền, Deputy General Chief of Staff, and a number of other cadres. As representatives of the Central Military Committee and the General Army High Command on the Southern battlefield, they were code-named Group A75. This elite military command, having quickly taken shape both on the front and in the rear, acted in close coordination with the front to build a strategic, macro-scale view. The Politburo and Central Military Committee decision was kept top-secret.

Before the A75 group departed for Tây Nguyên, Văn Tiến Dũng, Hoàng Văn Thái and I discussed combat strategies for the Tây Nguyên Campaign. Hoàng Văn Thái and I had worked together from the start of the French resistance war and were both members of the Military Committee. Extensive discussions led us to agree on many issues, including which combat plan would be most effective. The first strategic blow, we decided, must come as a surprise; Buôn Ma Thuột must be taken first. From the very first battle, victory must be secured. Thereafter, continuous attacks would need to be launched to destroy as many Southern live forces as possible and to liberate the strategic area of Tây Nguyên.

I suggested two alternatives for striking Buôn Ma Thuột, both of which I had previously explained to the Standing Board of the Central Military Committee:

1. If the South failed to strengthen its forces, a strike would be launched straightaway.

2. If the South ordered reinforcements to Buôn Ma Thuột, their side would be lured out and their reinforcement troops attacked and destroyed at Cẩm Ga and Thuần Mẫn.

In either circumstance, effective feints must be undertaken in the directions of Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên, Kontum, and Pleiku.

The Tây Nguyên Campaign was the first phase of our basic strategic plan that had been approved by the Politburo and the Central Military Committee. During the first stage of our two-year plan, Tây Nguyên was to be liberated in 1975 along with several stretches in the Mekong Delta and the plains of Zone V and Quảng Trị- Thừa Thiên. At the same time, efforts would be made to destroy a host of Southern posts in eastern Nam Bộ.

Under a standard arrangement, Dũng took the name of Tuấn, and I the name of Chiến. The Heads of the General Chief of Staff's Office, the General Political Department, and the General Department of Logistics also took false names.

On February 5, 1975, Group A75 set out when our people were celebrating the spring of Ất Mão Lunar New Year. Deceptive tactics were employed and steps were taken to ensure secrecy in order to divert the South's attention. Our departure for the front during the Tết festival added to the secrecy of attack we required. Marching toward the front during Tết had been a tradition in Vietnamese warfare since the battle between Tết Kỷ Dậu and Ngọc Hồi-Đống Đa (1789), and the Tết Mậu Thân (1968) with the general offensives and insurrections.

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During phase one of the 1974-75 dry season, military activities were being carried out on various battlefields, with victories from Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên to Nam Bộ exceeding all target figures.

Along with the Phước Long victory, from December 1974 to February 1975 the army and people of eastern Nam Bộ wiped out 22 Southern battalions, inflicted heavy losses on 25 other battalions, and destroyed over 1,500 positions, including one

subzone, eight subsectors, three important sectors, and 88 military subsectors.

In the Mekong Delta, we destroyed 15 enemy battalions, wiped out 35,000 Southern troops, and demolished 168 posts in only two months. Behind a series of mass uprisings, we completely liberated 51 communes and 414 hamlets. while chiefly liberating 49 other communes; in total, 50,000 people were liberated. We recorded our biggest victories in Trà Vinh and Vĩnh Long, the latter being the most important area within Military Zone IX.

Sài Gòn and its suburbs were the focus of concentrated defence efforts by the South. Even in these areas, with only local forces, commandos, special commandos and guerillas, we completely liberated 17,000 people in three communes and 37 hamlets, while liberating the majority of people in a number of other communes. The South's tight control over the citizenry was loosened. People could freely move about and engage in their daily business.

Following our victories in La Sơn-Mỏ Tàu, Thượng Đức, Minh Long, Nông Sơn, Trung Phước, Giá Vụt, Măng Đen, and Măng Bút, our army made preparations for Spring-Summer 1975 activities in Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên, Zone V and Tây Nguyên. The Central Military Committee convened the Standing Board of the Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên Military Committee to travel to Hà Nội in October 1974 to report on the situation, in Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên particularly, and get instructions on combat tasks for 1975. The Military Committee commended the main forces of the military zone on their victories in La Sơn-Mỏ Tàu, then cited their failure to avail themselves of main force strikes to step up the local mass movement. It also commended the troops and militias of the military zone that had strictly complied with battlefield organization, completed the building of Highway 74, and transported supplies successfully to south Thừa Thiên. With regard to our aims on the Quảng Trị- Thừa Thiên battlefield, I stressed the need to foil the South's 'pacification' plan while preparing the region for the complete liberation of Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên-Huế in 1976. I explained, moreover, that we would have to undertake a combined military and political campaign to

synthesize the three categories of forces – the three thrusts of struggle – with a view to destroy entire regiments and battalions, wiping out or dissolving a crucial part of the South's live force. This would require the main forces of both the Army High Command and the military zone.

The General Chief of Staff's Office also directed Army Corps 2 and the Trị-Thiên Military Zone to start a medium- size campaign on Highway 12 and in the northwest of Huế. Slated for the Spring of 1975, the campaign was designed to destroy part of the South's live forces, attract Southern mobile forces through diversion operations (in coordination with our strategic attack on Tây Nguyên), and carry out the 1975 combat tasks laid down for the whole front by the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command.

In late January 1975, the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command adopted the first draft plan for the Trị-Thiên Military Zone and Army Corps 2. They also appointed the Front's Party Committee, which included representatives from the Military Zonal Party Committee, the Army Corps 2 Party Committee, and the Regional Party Committee, with Lê Tự Đồng as Party Secretary. The Army High Command would directly assume command of both the military zone and the Army Corps; no unified command was set up.

At that time, a group of military cadres had recently returned from studying in the Soviet Union. Those cadres with experience fighting in big battles, and with mastery in employing many arms in coordinated combat, were assigned to various main force units. Nguyễn Hữu An was appointed Commander of Army Corps 2. Lê Hữu Đức was appointed Head of the Combat Operations Department, replacing Vũ Lăng who had been appointed Commander of the Tây Nguyên Front.

In early February, the Central Military Party Committee ratified our combat plan for Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên. Comrades from the Command of the Military Zone and Army Corps 2 drove to Hà Nội to assume their tasks. On February 28,1975, Thanh Quảng, on behalf of the Command of the Trị- Thiên Military Zone, and Hoàng Đan, on behalf of the Command of Army Corps 2,

arrived at the Defence Ministry to report their final resolve. The military arm of the Air Defence-Air Force was directed to fly them by helicopter to Đồng Hới; from there they flew back to Hà Nội aboard YAK 40.

At the General Headquarters, Lê Trọng Tấn, Lê Hữu Đức and I received reports on combat plans; the results exceeded what we had targeted.

"Do you have," I asked after hearing the report, "a plan to develop our attacks and liberate Trị-Thiên-Huế in case a favorable opportunity arises?"

Thanh Quảng and Hoàng Dân, who had clearly been elated before, now seemed embarrassed!

"The plan," I went on, "is good in the main. But you must immediately work out a way to broaden our attack if the opportunity presents itself. Our target is the liberation of Trị-Thiên-Huế. Is that clear?"

After a moment of embarrassment, they grew self-assured. "Clear, sir!" they answered in unison.

They proposed to postpone the start of the campaign for five days, until March 9. Upon hearing the words "March 9", Tấn stood up and protested.

"In a major campaign of strategic significance," he began, "with the coordination of several sectors, you cannot launch the attack haphazardly. If you postpone it, the South may send its strategic reserve paratrooper division to southern Tây Nguyên. As our main thrust would thereby collapse, where then would our general offensive be headed? You have been invited to meet many times about this plan already. Many envoys have already been dispatched to communicate it. Countless telegrams have already been sent about it. How is it possible you don't understand the fundamental dangers of postponement?"

Tấn continued in this vein for five minutes.

Thanh Quảng and Hoàng Đan blushed.

"The views of the General Chief of Staff's Office are clear," I said when Tấn had finished. "What about the Combat Operations Department?"

"It is very dangerous to push back the date at this time," Đức replied. "But I propose that the Command takes full note of the difficulties, especially of Army Corps 2. Nguyễn Hữu An, Commander, has just returned from a course of military study in the Soviet Union. I propose that on D-Day, at H- hour, the main force regiments and local armed forces of Quảng Trị-Thừa Thiên simultaneously open fire. With regard to Army Corps 2, the date would be postponed for only two days. The enemy knows that Army Corps 2 is now in Trị- Thiên. It would not risk moving its paratrooper division during a time of inactivity ."

Lê Trọng Tấn told Thanh Quảng and Hoàng Đan that he was aware of their difficulties. "However," he added, "you must know that your campaign lies within the framework of the country's overall military situation. So you must stick to a very tight schedule. It's impossible to allow one to start this attack any time he wants. You've taken part in many major campaigns, so aren't you aware of this?"

Tấn turned to me and spoke. "I request your permission for the forces of the Trị-Thiên Military Zone and the artillery of Army Corps 2 to open fire at the appointed time on March 5. Two days later, as proposed by the Combat Operations Department, the major forces of Army Corps 2 would also open fire."

I gave my agreement, then directed the General Chief of Staff's Office to oversee the plan's implementation.

After the two comrades left, I turned to Tấn. "You acted today much in keeping with the rules," I said.

"Impatience is a terrible shortcoming," he replied. "Minister, I propose that you commend the Head of the Combat Operations Department for his intelligence."

"It is in this way only that the boiler cover can be opened!" I laughed.

But I was not really easy about any of this. On the morning of March 3, I sent my secretary to Bạch Mai Airfield to ask my two comrades, just as their plane was about to take off, to return for another meeting. When I saw them, I gave them this advice:

"Remember that this campaign is not like any other. You may take advantages of your initiative and fight hard to exceed our targeted aims, but it is imperative that you understand this: it is absolutely forbidden for you to deviate from what has been specifically provided for by the Army High Command – you must strictly comply with their directives. You must actively create new opportunities and be ready to take advantage of them and march forward to big victories, including the liberation of Huế. While the destruction of Southern forces is very important, the construction of roads for mobility is no less important. You must engage all available forces to open these roads as they will facilitate our attacks.

The two comrades promised to fulfill all the tasks entrusted to them by the High Command in terms of timing, locality and volume.

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Following Group A75's itinerary, the Army High Command knew that it marched furtively and safely, celebrating Lunar New Year's Eve at Ia Đrăng and arriving in Tây Nguyên at the start of Lunar New Year. Soon after arriving at the Headquarters of Corps 559, Đinh Đức Thiện returned to Quảng Bình and supervised the transport of ammunitions to Tây Nguyên. All required campaign supplies were secured by Đồng Sĩ Nguyên and the Command of Corps 559: rice, ammunitions, fuel, and vehicles. The road to the front was filled with transport vehicles driving day and night. New sections of road were built – no longer by shovels and picks but by machines sent from Cuba as aid.

As had been agreed upon before he left, Văn Tiến Dũng, on behalf of the Central Military Committee, made public the decision to set up the Command of the Tây Nguyên Front.[1] The Standing

1. The Command was comprised Hoàng Minh Thảo, Commander; Đặng Vũ Hiệp, Political Commissar; Vũ Lăng, Nguyễn Năng, Nguyễn Lang, and Phan Hàm, Deputy Commanders; and Phí Triệu Hàm, Deputy Political Commissar.

Board of the Zone V Party Committee appointed Bùi San, member of the Zonal Committee Standing Board, along with a number of cadres, to represent the various sectors alongside the Party Committee and campaign command. This group would exercise direct guidance over the three provinces of Gia Lai, Kontum, and Daklak in the mobilization of all local potentialities to further the Tây Nguyên Campaign.

At the outset of our campaign, however, an unforeseen development thwarted our plan to attack Buôn Ma Thuột. The disposition of our troops on the Tây Nguyên battlefields differed somewhat from the expectation of our strategy-making agency. According to a previous plan to open a corridor of strategic transport to Nam Bộ, Division 10, in addition to many other units, had been positioned by local commanders from Đức Lập to Đắc Soong on Highway 14. In a telegram, Dũng reported that if the disposition of forces was readjusted, the situation would become very complex; time would be lost, as would the secrecy on which we were relying. For this reason, our comrades decided to attack Đức Lập as planned while steps were taken to encircle and isolate Buôn Ma Thuột. After the destruction of Đức Lập, Division 10 and other units would be mobilized to join the attack on Buôn Ma Thuột.

At 14h00 on February 25, 1975, I sent the following communique-to Văn Tiến Dũng:

"I have received your message dated February 17. Without having concrete details about the situation, I can only offer a few ideas based on discussions I had with Lê Đức Thọ:

"In the spirit of our exchange before you left, ponder the concrete details of the situation and then make a decision. It is advisable to carry out business in keeping with the way that Định[1] recommended or another way, to resolve A[2] first. Then, if the Southern forces show weakness and we are in a position to

1. A cadre of the Combat Operations Department sent out to follow the Buôn Ma Thuột battle.
2. Buôn Ma Thuột.

utilize our secrecy, destroy them, and quickly proceed to build toward victory.

"Whatever alternative we select, we need make effective use of our secrecy and gain a major victory in the first battle. Subsequently, we will need plans to build off that victory, destroy as many Southern forces as possible, and liberate strategic areas.

"Check the plan for logistic support and ensure it is fully provided, even in the event of increased attacks on the corridor by Southern forces. Signed: Chiến."

Carrying out the plan of the High Command, Military Zone V sent Deputy Commander Võ Thứ to Bình Định, where he would organize Division 3 to cut off Highway 19. The local comrades did not completely agree with this decision, and proposed that a single regiment be entrusted with this task. Chu Huy Mân intervened at once. Only on orders of the commander and political commissar of the Military Zone did the local comrades agree to the movement of Division 3. The Military Zone also ordered its artillery regiment to join Division 3 in cutting off Highway 19, a strategy that was to bear significantly on future military developments.

The Tây Nguyên campaign developed favorably for us. Through its collection and exploitation of enemy information, our Combat Operations team made the following report:

On February 25, 1975, we intensified our enemy deception activities. Division 968 wiped out two enemy positions on Highway 19 west of Pleiku, and shelled Cù Hanh Airfield.

On March 4, Regiment 95A and Division 3 (Military Zone V) wiped out a host of positions and cut off Highway 19 in An Khê. Southern forces sent out a commando detachment and shelled areas in which they suspected we were sheltering troops.

On the night of March 5, Regiment 25 cut off Highway 21 east of Chư Cúc and destroyed a convoy of 80 vehicles. Tây Nguyên had started to become isolated from the plains.

Other reports, filtering in from the battlefield, demonstrated that the enemy could not yet exploit the situation.

On March 7, our troops wiped out the Chư Xê position (north of Buôn Hồ) on Highway 14.

On March 8, Regiment 48 of Division 320 captured the Thuần Mẫn military subsector.

On March 9, Division 10 occupied Đức Lập's district center. In the north, we destroyed Thanh An's district center and threatened Pleiku.

Buôn Ma Thuột was thus encircled and isolated.

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The Tây Nguyên battlefield raged on.

The attack launched by Division 10 and Artillery Regiment 40 on Đức Lập and the integrated defence line (comprising five strong points on Highway 14 southwest of Buôn Ma Thuột) forced the South into a critical situation. The South's Núi Lửa Base and Base 23 were successively wiped out. Southern forces retrenched themselves into the district center, engaging in stubborn resistance. Division 10 had to halt its attack in order to consolidate its forces, then continued its attack until the following day.

Facing this critical situation, Phạm Văn Phú, Commander of Tactical Zone II, flew to Buôn Ma Thuột to meet the Deputy Commander of the South's Division 23 and the Governor of Daklak province. In Phú's assessment, Đức Lập could not be saved, so there was no need for reinforcements. As an immediate response, Regiment 53 moved to preserve the Daklak crossroads. If on the following day the situation improved, a counterattack would be launched to retake Đức Lập. If the Southern troops did not succeed in that effort, they would be allowed to retreat to their base area unharassed. The communists' attack on Quảng Đức, Phú said, which appeared to threaten Buôn Ma Thuột, was merely a feint they carried out in order to muster enough forces to attack Kontum-Pleiku the following day. Consequently, the critical task at that time was to strengthen all possibilities to cope with the communists, especially with regard to Kontum and Pleiku.

At that time, the Southern army remained unaware of our troops' intentions and planned direction of attack. They seemed to believe that our threat against Buôn Ma Thuột was a feint performed before we would attack Pleiku and Kontum, and that the attack on Đức Lập was designed to open a corridor to Nam Bộ. Hence, their primary concern was the preparation that would be necessary to fend off an attack in the northern part of Tây Nguyên. They withdrew numerous forces from the southern part of Tây Nguyên to reinforce Pleiku. Phú was positive that Pleiku would be the main direction of attack because Division 320 of the Việt Cộng had remained there while the Việt Cộng's Division 10 was still in Đắc Tô-Tân Cảnh. In Buôn Ma Thuột there would be coordinated activities between "special commandos" and artillery units, but Pleiku would not be the main direction of our attack.

Our strategic feint succeeded. In the first psychological test we gave them, the South's general staff committed critical mistakes. Buôn Ma Thuột was now even more exposed.

At 1h55 on March 10, 1975, while the South's Army Corps 2 was making all-out preparations to defend against our main forces in the northern part of Tây Nguyên, the Buôn Ma Thuột battle began. Special Commandos Regiment 198, backed by a mortar unit, opened fire. They soon occupied Ngã Sáu Helicopter Airfield, Mai Hắc Đế Storehouses Complex, and Hòa Bình Airfield. Heavy artillery from our gun emplacements around Buôn Ma Thuột shelled the base of Division 23, the Command Post of the Daklak subsector, and the barracks of the enemy's artillery and armored vehicle units.

Buôn Ma Thuột, the provincial capital of Daklak province, and the political, economic and cultural center of Tây Nguyên, was militarily significant. It laid at the crossroads of strategic Highway 21, Highway 1 to Nha Trang, and Highway 14 leading to Pleiku in the north and to eastern Nam Bộ in the south. The population of the area was estimated at 96,000. The enemy garrisoned here about 8,400 men, including an infantry regiment, two armored vehicle detachments, two artillery battalions, the Headquarters of Division 23, and Commando Intergroup 21. They also garrisoned civil guards, police forces, and had stationed here the bases of Infantry

Regiment 45, Regiment 8 of armored vehicles, and Artillery Regiment 222 with its two airfields – Buôn Ma Thuột Airfield and Hòa Bình Airfield. By selecting Buôn Ma Thuột as the main target of attack, the Supreme Command anticipated that it would be able to upend the entire Southern defence in Tây Nguyên and convulse the whole South Vietnamese battlefield by a blow dealt at a neuralgic point.

At dawn, the Politburo and Central Military Committee received the following message from Văn Tiến Dũng.

"On March 10, 1975, we attacked Buôn Ma Thuột. We are in good health. Thiện traveled to Corps 559 to extend his active support to this campaign. We have striven to meet all requirements. The soldiers have enough to eat their fill, our forces are large, our weapons and equipment are in full supply, and our morale is high. Never before have we launched such a strong, concentrated strike as we have done here this year. I will send another message soon with major observations about developments on the battlefield. Wishing all the best to the members of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee. Signed: Tuấn"

The Tây Nguyên Campaign had opened. I chaired the daily information meetings of the General Chief of Staff's Office.[1]

On the morning of March 10, for our routine information meeting at the Headquarters' "Dragon House", everybody was elated to receive the first news of victory: We had controled Đức Lập district center along with Đắc Soong and Núi Lửa, and opened a north-south strategic corridor. The Buôn Ma Thuột battle started at dawn that day and soon developed in our favor.

At the General Headquarters, cadres responsible for combat operations, information, and cipher worked through the night and into morning. The Việt Nam News Agency, Foreign Ministry, Army Intelligence Department, and Propaganda and Training Department used formal reports issued by the enemy and various Western

1. These meetings were usually attended by Hoàng Văn Thái, Lê Trọng Tấn, Trần Quý Hai, Vương Thừa Vũ, Trần Sâm, Trần Văn Quang, Cao Văn Khánh, Phùng Thế Tài, Phạm Ngọc Mậu (Deputy Head of the General Political Department), and Vũ Xuân Chiêm (Deputy Head of the General Department of Logistics).

bureaus to help the Supreme Command assess the situation and direct the war effort every second and every minute.

Reports flowed in. In Ngã Sáu Airfield, Regiment 198 of the Special Commandos had destroyed major targets, occupied a police area, field hospital, and created a corridor at the northeastern doorstep of Buôn Ma Thuột. The Special Commando fighters swiftly wiped out the command post of the Mai Hắc Đế Storehouse Complex, forced an opening to the northwest, and laid the groundwork for an attack on the Southern base of Division 23.

Our infantry, tank, and armored vehicle units crossed the Serepok River were ready for attack. Our five thrusts of attack took shape around Buôn Ma Thuột.

Fierce fighting ensued at the Ngã Sáu crossroads. Regiment 95B repulsed the Southern troops' counterattack with their tank and air force cover.

By 6h30 on March 10, behind the support of our campaign's artillery, the combatants of Division 316 had occupied various targets in Buôn Ma Thuột. Northwest of here, we attacked an information area, a transport area, and approached the base of the South's Division 23.

Northeast of Buôn Ma Thuột, our infantry, with tank support, attacked the Daklak subsector. We had it occupied by 15h00.

In the South, our troops attacked military bases and Hòa Bình's district center.

On March 10, all targeted areas in the provincial capital, with the exception of the Command Post of the South's Division 23, were occupied by our troops.

The situation developed in our favor. The Campaign Command decided to muster forces to destroy the Headquarters of Division 23 and any remaining targets in Buôn Ma Thuột. They would also wipe out bases in Bản Đôn, Chư Nga, and Buôn Hồ, and intercept entering reinforcement troops. We readied our forces for a Southern counterattack.

It was at that moment that Nguyễn Văn Thiệu and his generals understood the situation. "Fight to the death to defend Buôn Ma Thuột!" they shouted over the Sài Gòn radio. Obviously, though, it was much too late.

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On the following morning, March 11, the Politburo and Central Military Committee met at Headquarters. This was the first meeting of the Supreme Command since the opening of the Tây Nguyên Campaign.

Elated at the victories recorded during the first days of our campaign, the comrades discussed the development of our forces' potential and strength vis-a-vis the decline of our enemy's forces. We were agreed on the need to broaden our attack and to prepare ourselves to repel Southern counterattacks.

The Southern troops were unable to withstand our troops' attacks on military sub-sectors and district centers, and became demoralized. Our side started to think about winning bigger victories than we had initially forecasted.

In our meeting we discussed the possibility of Southern withdrawal from Tây Nguyên. If that were to happen, plans must be readied to tightly encircle the enemy, separately section them off, then launch attacks and try to prevent them from escaping.

The meeting also realized that the situation on the battlefield was changing quickly and that our opportunity to advance might pass. The time had come to think about undertaking military and political activities in Huế, Trị- Thiên and Đà Nẵng. The situation was again favorable to us. We had won at Phước Long, and now there was Buôn Ma Thuột. Was it appropriate, we asked ourselves, to reconsider our two-year plan? Could we accelerate it?

I pointed out that new factors had emerged and would lead substantially to progress. The Southern forces had been spread thin; it would be easy to break them at any time and into any number of sections. The possibility of enemy withdrawal from Tây Nguyên could not be ruled out. Our army remained in full force, its morale

was high, and its logistic supplies were guaranteed. It was necessary to act diligently and take advantage of our opportunities as soon as they arose.

Closing the meeting, Lê Duẩn delivered a short speech in which he pointed out our military activities during the first days of the campaign. He regarded this as a new "style of work". He asked if it would be possible to intensify our military activities. We pondered over whether Buôn Ma Thuột now represented the opening battle in our strategic general offensive. We knew we had to have our powerful main force "fists" at this juncture. Our various army corps in the South and North must be used in a flexible yet focused way. There must be no dispersal of our forces.

After the meeting, we received a message from Văn Tiến Dũng:

"Dear Brother Chiến,

We have attained full control over Buôn Ma Thuột. We have also captured such important targets as the Headquarters of Division 23, the Daklak subsector, the armored vehicle and artillery park, and the provincial town airfield. We are now seeking any remaining troops hiding out in Buôn Ma Thuột. According to preliminary reports, we have captured nearly 1,000 prisoners of war (not yet classified) and a substantial quantity of war booty. We have also captured 12 guns and about 100 tons of shells. Operations have been completed in Đức Lập and Đắc Soong.

"We are developing operations to wipe out surrounding targets such as the bases of Regiments 45 and 53, Buôn Hồ, and Bản Đôn. We are also sending reinforcements to occupy Hòa Bình Airfield.

"On March 11, the Daklak Military Control Committee will elaborate on its military activities. For the sake of convenience, we propose to appoint comrade Y Bloc as colonel and Chairman of the Committee."

Based on the overall battlefield situation, and given logistics support and favorable weather conditions, Tuấn intended to consolidate Buôn Ma Thuột and stand ready to foil all counterattacks. He would see to it that we develop our activities, in surrounding areas to achieve full control over Daklak and in the

east to Cheo Reo (either besieging or wiping out Cheo Reo), and from there to encircle and overrun Pleiku and isolate Kontum.

Developments south of this would be postponed until a later date.

Tuấn proposed that I exchange views with the Military Party Committee, make a report to the Politburo, then immediately inform him of the results.

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The Tây Nguyên Campaign started with a brilliant victory: the liberation of Buôn Ma Thuột.

So the military situation developed more rapidly than we had anticipated in our two-year strategic plan (the first stage of which laid the groundwork for liberating Tây Nguyên in 1975). With our Buôn Ma Thuột victory, it would be possible to liberate Tây Nguyên much earlier.

Feeling relieved over the situation in Tây Nguyên, I immediately thought about the coordination of battlefields in Trị-Thiên, Zone V, and Nam Bộ, especially the Mekong Delta.

The General Chief of Staff's Office reported that the war situation was developing well for us. In Trị-Thiên, our troops, secretly penetrating the enemy's thick peripheral defence line, moved down to the plains and the environs of Huế City, where they launched repeated attacks on Southern positions and coercion systems. The people and troops of Zone V wiped out Tiến Phước's district center and threatened both Quảng Tín and Quảng Ngãi.

On the Nam Bộ Front, the South could no longer pressgang its troops, and its low-level forces were soon depleted. Northern troops, and the people of the Mekong Delta, closely coordinated our three thrusts of attack, wiped out many Southern positions, and liberated broad areas. Our revolutionary movement had surged.

Based on the victories at Phước Long and Bà Đen, B2 had ready a plan of activity all over the region in coordination with the main

battlefield. The second stage of the 1974-75 dry season plan began on D day (March 9-10, 1975) according to orders of the Army High Command. In addition to this military plan, there was another plan to incite mass uprisings and employ our overall forces in general attacks and insurrections. The Zonal Command had also adopted a plan and assigned tasks for its implementation to Army Corps 4 and to various military regions, divisions and the special commando forces inside Sài Gòn.

At that time, we were forced to ponder the disposition of leaders in our "main-force fists" strategy. The Tây Nguyên victory evidenced all the more clearly how important this task was. The Central Military Committee decided to appoint the commanding officers of Army Corps 4 and Corps 232.[1]

At 19h00 on March 11, I sent the following message to Văn Tiến Dũng:

"This morning, before receiving your message, the Politburo and Military Committee met to discuss war developments and strategy. Following are the main points of our meeting:

The strategic campaign plan laid down by the Politburo and the Military Committee was sound, and its preparatory work was carried out well. It was not surprising, then, that the first days of fighting saw us win a major victory.

Our victories in Buôn Ma Thuột-Đức Lập, and on Highway 19 and in other areas, shows that we are able to record major victories more quickly than have been forecasted. A prominent factor in this development is the very low morale of Southern troops.

During this stage of the conflict, and in subsequent plans that we develop, we need to show diligence, audacity, and avail ourselves of every opportunity to win victory.

1. In Army Corps 4, Hoàng Cầm was named Commander; Hoàng Thế Thiện, Political Commissar; Bùi Cát Vũ, Deputy Commander. In Corps 232, Nguyễn Minh Châu was Commander; Trần Văn Phác, Political Commissar; and Trần Văn Nghiêm, Deputy Commander.

In B3, the greatest attention must be devoted to the current stage of military activity and any subsequent plans we must develop.

Your message corresponds fully with the views exchanged this morning between the Politburo and the Military Committee, and I have just discussed it with Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ. We agree entirely with these objectives:

a. In Buôn Ma Thuột, it is necessary to wipe out all remaining enemy forces; develop our activities in the surrounding areas; and stand ready to fight Southern reinforcement troops.

b. We must quickly extend our operations in the direction of Cheo Reo, then encircle the South's troops and destroy them.

c. We must immediately encircle Pleiku; strategically cut the Southern forces off from one another; and encircle An Khê, then destroy it so as to isolate Pleiku.

Our operation plans for the South will be developed later. In the building of our offensive, we must establish firm control over our main forces and avoid their dispersion in battle.

The Standing Board of the Central Military Committee appointed comrade Y Bloc colonel. The Politburo and the Central Military Committee commends all cadres, fighters, Party members, Youth Union members, civil servants of Ministry of Defence, and comrades on the Tây Nguyên Front for their victory.

Wishing you good health, and with best wishes to the comrades there. Signed: Chiến."

An atmosphere of elation, confidence, and determination prevailed in the Army Headquarters.

The strategy-making agency was at that time focused on getting a clear sense of the situation facing the South. I ordered a telephone installed in the private home of the Head of Bureau 70 of the Military Intelligence Department, and advised my secretary to notify me about any technical information that was received, no matter where I was or what I was doing, even if I was attending a

Politburo meeting. Every morning at 4h30 a.m., Thanh was called on to report any news received during the night.

The South, realizing its wrong assessment about our attacks, undertook relatively passive counter-measures.

We received reports that Nguyễn Văn Thiệu planned to dispatch his remaining forces around Buôn Ma Thuột, then bring in infantry troops and air support for a counterattack that would enable him to retake the provincial town. Column 45, along with basic elements of the Command of the South's Division 23, landed by helicopter in Buôn Hồ at noon on March 11. The Southern air force had largely been mobilized.

Exactly 24 hours later, the Military Committee sent this message to Dũng, Hoàng Minh Thảo and the Standing Board of the B3 Party Committee:

"The enemy intends to rely militarily on his surviving forces in the vicinity of Buôn Ma Thuột. He plans to send in reinforcements in coordination with its air force to launch a counterattack to retake Buôn Ma Thuột. Therefore, it is urgent that we muster more forces, destroy enemy units and bases around Buôn Ma Thuột, and wipe out its reinforcement troops. The annhilation of a substantial portion of the South's live forces around Buôn Ma Thuột will bear decisively on the development of our Campaign. At the same time, to direct all activities in the directions for development as projected: Cheo Reo, Pleiku and Highway 19. We will also need to use prisoners of war to further our combat operations as well as the spread of propaganda among enemy troops.

Wishing you great victory,

Signed: Chiến."

At the same time, I directed the General Chief of Staff's Office to send to Zone V, Trị- Thiên and Army Corps 2 information regarding the content of our March 11 Politburo meeting. They would also receive guidance on subsequent plans for activity on various battlefields. In the orientations that we had forecast, to rely on the basic resolve that we had made, to plan and carry out our attacks in

a timely and resolute way, and to focus on destroying the greatest number of the South's live forces when they either withdraw or send in reinforcements.

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These were the lively days of March.

It had become routine for members of the Politburo and the Central Military Committee to arrive at Army Headquarters for military briefings and reports from the General Chief of Staff's Office, then to deliberate over them and offer final views. I personally used to work without a midday recess and, in the evening, would enter the Army Headquarters through its western passage to work and spend the night there. My elation over developments in the war warded off exhaustion. The beautiful spring weather infused my mind with optimism. Our strategic initiative increased the sang-froid and flexibility of the command agency. Contrarily, the South found itself mired in a hopeless situation.

At the morning briefing of March 13, the General Chief of Staff's Office reported that the South might either muster his remaining forces in Tây Nguyên and Pleiku or pull out of Tây Nguyên entirely. Whatever the case, we had to defeat the South at any cost and liberate Tây Nguyên.

The briefing was quick and orderly. Time was strength and could not be wasted. I immediately sent the following message to Dũng:

"If the South loses many live forces along with Buôn Ma Thuột and several district centers, and if we succeed in strategically cutting off Highway 19, it could muster its remaining forces in B3 and Pleiku. It is advisable that we strategize on how to force the South into withdrawal. We must encircle Pleiku with all kinds of fire-power, including anti-aircraft guns, to cut off Southern supply ways, while simultaneously preparing to defeat the enemy with regard to each of these eventualities: the enemy either retrenches himself in Pleiku or pulls out of Tây Nguyên. Signed: Văn."

I sent the message at 9h00 a.m.

On the following day, Lê Trọng Tấn sent me a message with the latest news from Bureau II: The situation in Pleiku and Kontum was chaotic. Southern troops had burned down storehouses. The population was panic-stricken. Thiệu had flown to Cam Ranh, heard a report from Phú on the situation. Cao Văn Viên, Trần Thiện Khiêm and Đặng Văn Quang were also present at this meeting. After wards, Thiệu said that the South's military aid had been cut. There was a shortage of money and ammunitions. Still, the South was attacking vigorously. Kontum and Pleiku were thinly populated, and their economies were poor. Thiệu ordered his troops to pull out, then reorganized them for a defence of the coastal area. The withdrawal road was the Interprovincial Highway 7.

I told Tấn that the South was clearly abandoning Pleiku- Kontum and that it would regroup its forces between the plains of Zone V, Huế and Đà Nẵng. I asked him to send an immediate message informing Dũng of these rapid developments.

Văn Tiến Dũng and the Tây Nguyên Command quickly reached agreement with regard to the content of their messages. They immediately ordered our troops to organize the encirclement and subsequent attacks. However, not everyone showed such flair in the face of swift change. Later it became known that a number of cadres on the battlefields at the time differed in opinion, with some telling Vũ Lăng, Deputy Commander of the Tây Nguyên Front, "The Southern troops never withdraw from Pleiku!"

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The whole country turned its attention to the South.

Daily newspapers were sold out by early morning. Virtually all households were sitting beside their radios waiting for news. The Việt Nam News Agency's express bulletins, though published daily in multiple editions, were unable to meet demand. Many people were listening to BBC broadcasts. Foreign reporters residing in Hà Nội ran all over in search of news.

Public opinion must develop coincidentally with military developments. It would be detrimental for us to divulge information constantly and engage in propaganda work at this time. After exchanging views with Politburo members, I immediately sent a message to Dũng:

"Under instructions of the Politburo, we are to gradually implement a publicity campaign. At the start, we are to publish reports on specific battles and announce the liberation of Buôn Ma Thuột only when our offensive is complete. In the news reports, we must draw attention to enemy violations of the Paris Agreement, focusing as well on mass uprisings and the activities of the Liberation Forces. Please inform me of your response. Signed: Chiến."

At the same time, I directed the General Political Department to share this decision with the media. In the theater of war, especially in decisive moments such as this, it is necessary to let one's actions speak for oneself. "There's no need to make big sounds."

Report after report poured in. The combat operations body had to select correct news to timely report to higher levels.

The South, meanwhile, had detected the direction from which we planned to launch our strategic offensive against Tây Nguyên. In an attempt to retake Buôn Ma Thuột, they were transporting paratroopers and armored vehicle formations for a counterattack. Nguyễn Văn Thiệu ordered Phạm Văn Phú to consolidate their forces and retake Buôn Ma Thuột at any cost. He dispatched Commando Intergroup 21, along with Regiments 44 and 45 of Division 23 (with support of Air Division 3, which was stationed in Thành Sơn Airfield in Phan Rang). He simultaneously moved Commando Intergroup 7 from Sài Gòn to Pleiku to replace Division 23.

Intergroup 21 suffered heavy losses even before it could take action. On March 13, Southern Regiment 45, transported by 200 helicopter sorties, arrived in the eastern part of Buôn Ma Thuột. The Regiment immediately lost two battalions when our troops intercepted it.

On March 15, from the Zone V battlefield, Chu Huy Mân reported that the situation was quickly developing in our favor. Along the coastal area, Zone V would attack Tam Kỳ, Trà Bồng, and Sơn Hà, then refocus its operations on the region of Highway 4 around Quảng Ngãi and Bình Định. Zone V would also enable open breaches in the plains while securing control over its population, then besiege An Khê and improve our opportunity for victory.

That same day, after discussing new developments in Tây Nguyên and other battlefields with Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ, I sent the following message to Văn Tiến Dũng:

"March 15, 1975. 20h00.

Dear Tuấn,

"Lê Duẩn, Lê Đức Thọ and I have assessed the situation as follows:

"1. According to various sources, the enemy has determined that our main direction of attack will be the southern part of Tây Nguyên. It has also ascertained with fair accuracy our total forces here, and understands that our military activities in other areas will be relatively limited. Therefore, it has decided to concentrate its efforts by mobilizing a number of commando intergroups and armored vehicle formations. The enemy may launch large-scale operations along Highway 21 in an attempt to retake Buôn Ma Thuột.

"In spite of its increased troopers, the Southern army has very low morale, and they are encountering many difficulties. We are well positioned to wipe out its entire live forces.

"2. Consequently, we need to concentrate our forces in Zone A (Buôn Ma Thuột) and its environs, prepare our reserve forces for battle, rapidly assemble enough fire power to wipe out enemy columns primarily in the direction of Phước An, and stand ready to destroy enemy reinforcements sent in by air or by land.

"Subsequently, we will dispatch forces to defeat the enemy in Cheo Reo.

"Buôn Ma Thuột is developing into a large-scale conflict in which we will strive to destroy two enemy divisions. The destruction of a large portion of enemy forces here will decisively impact our Campaign across the whole Tây Nguyên battlefield. Cadres and combatants alike must seize this opportunity to wipe out the South's live forces and liberate the southern part of Tây Nguyên.

"3. With regard to B (Nam Bộ), we must carefully assume a position of encirclement, strengthen our control over its airfields, destroy enemy storehouses there, and make certain not to give the enemy time and space for respite.

With best wishes for a great victory,

Signed: Chiến."

While the above message was being decoded, I received another one from Dũng announcing that the troops were elated and promised "to strive to implement all Politburo instructions in order to achieve its stated aims, hasten the defeat of the South, and surpass the targets laid out in the 1975 plan. In the face of these rapid military developments, the work style of some cadres has been a hindrance that needs to be overcome at once."

After reading this, I added a passage to the message that was being decoded:

"I have received your fifth message. We agree that our 1975 plan will be completed well ahead of schedule. We are researching new military strategies and preparing diligently for early victory. After receiving instructions from the Politburo, I will immediately inform you of them."

So there was wide agreement between the front and rear, and the upper and lower levels of command were showing their determination. We understood the need to win swifter, more significant victories without being completely bound to the targets and schedule that had been laid down in our basic plan.

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The situation was developing quickly.

Although we restricted news and information coming out of the battlefield, our country, and the whole world, was drawn toward the revolutionary whirlwind in South Việt Nam.

In the Party and the army, where the war was closely followed and reported, the atmosphere was all the more buoyant. All thoughts were directed to the South.

Since early February, at the suggestion of Lê Trọng Tấn, the Military Committee had agreed to allow the General Chief of Staff's Office to study combat plans subsequent to the Tây Nguyên Campaign, namely the Huế-Đà Nẵng and Sài Gòn Campaigns. This Office, jointly with the general departments of the Defence Ministry, would first identify strategic targets and then decide how best to employ our forces and secure logistic and technical supplies. At that time, the combat operation body had not enough cadres because a number of capable and experienced assistants had joined Corps A75. After discussing the situation with the General Political Department, I rang on Lê Hữu Đức, Head of the Combat Operations Department.

"Go at once to the Cadres' Department," I told him, "and select a number of cadres to draft plans. I have met with Song Hào, and we are in complete agreement over this. Send somebody to Station 66 and have them invite Trần Hải Phụng, Commander of the Sài Gòn-Gia Định commando unit, to join the study team on the Sài Gòn Campaign. He knows Sài Gòn very well. Be sure to use special commandos to attack important targets."

Our advances on the battlefield had occurred well ahead of all assessments and forecasts. At Army Headquarters, I used to stand for a very long time before our battlefield map. Here, I would not only follow developments in our army's various prongs of attack, and then the South's counter-measures, but also to ponder over future military strategies which could be carried out from Trị-Thiên to the Mekong Delta.

In order to receive news from the battlefield as soon as it came in, I often went to the combat duty room and sat up with my comrades until very late at night.

During times of great stress and tension, I rowed a boat in West Lake to relax. 1 was usually accompanied by a cadre, with whom I might carry out light work. Most often, though, I would note down important ideas that suddenly came to me while on the water.

On March 16, immediately upon learning that the South had pulled out of Kontum, I sent a message to the Command of the Tây Nguyên Campaign requesting that an attack against fleeing Southern troops be organized. I also directed Military Region V to send local troops to close off Highway 7, thereby enabling Division 968 and Engineering Division 470 to enter Pleiku and Kontum unimpeded.

On the following day, the Combat Operations Department reported that our forces had shut down the highway and were attacking the fleeing Southern troops. In coordination with other comrades in the main battlefield of Tây Nguyên, our troops caused a major breach in the Southern defence system along the Highway 14 area of Trị-Thiên, killing or capturing around 1,000 enemy soldiers. Our troops also entrapped then repulsed Southern forces southwest of Thừa Thiên, wiped out their Chúc Mao post and Height 300, and threatened the immediate area northwest of Huế. This last operation created conditions allowing our local forces to launch attrition attacks, carry out armed propaganda, and establish grassroots bases among our populations from the area south of the Thạch Hãn River to Lăng Cô Bay.

The General Chief of Staff's Office quickly grasped the changes in Military Zone V and Nam Bộ. During the March 17 briefing, before a detailed battle map which reflected the most recent military developments, I arrived at this conclusion: After our troops foiled the South's counterattack to retake Buôn Ma Thuột, enemy forces would begin a strategic regroupment in the direction of Sài Gòn, Cam Ranh and possibly Đà Nẵng. The great opportunity, I saw, had arisen.

After discussing these matters, we the leaders in the General Chief of Staff's Office agreed to make the following proposal to the Politburo. With the liberation of Tây Nguyên, we were to pursue two major objectives: 1) the majority of our forces in B3 would

march into eastern Nam Bộ; and 2) our remaining forces would march into the plains of Zone V, possibly supported by a division. To meet the requirements of our various prongs of attack, Corps 559 was ordered to move in its entirety from the Trường Sơn road to Highway 14 (Pleiku-Kontum), to further equip our troops, while engaging simultaneously in transport work, corridor defence, and consolidation of the liberated zone.

At the end of our briefing, I sent this message to Văn Tiến Dũng:

"The enemy is effecting a strategic regroupment earlier than we had expected. In the face of our attacks, this strategic regroupment will likely continue. Their movements are toward concentrations in Sài Gòn, Cam Ranh and possibly Đà Nẵng. This is a momentous opportunity for us. What is the major direction of our attacks? Give me your answer as quick as possible so that I can have the views of the Politburo tomorrow morning.

With best wishes for good health and glorious victory,

Signed: Chiến."

The message went out at 9h00 a.m.

Hardly had I sat down and opened the *Nhân dân* (People) newspaper, with its banner headline on our military victory, when the combat officer on duty handed me a message from Dũng that was dated March 16. Dũng had sent an update on the latest developments in Tây Nguyên and requested that the Politburo and Central Military Committee give guidance on some major problems: the defence and consolidation of newly liberated areas; the annihilation of enemy reinforcements; the capture of the remaining two districts of Daklak province and Đức Xuyên district, and the defence of Highway 21; the development of attacks in the direction of Cheo Reo; and the cutting off of Pleiku and Kontum.

Dũng further proposed that B2 launch coordinated attacks in the direction of Quảng Đức, occupy Nhân Cơ, then encircle and wipe out Gia Nghĩa. Zone V would attack and destroy An Khê, then shut down Highway 19. B4 and B5 were to cut off Huế-Đà Nẵng, and create a threat to the enemy's troops in these two cities.

The Combat Operations Department distributed Dũng's message to members of the Politburo and Central Military Committee. Before the message went out, I added:

*"Alternative one:* After Tây Nguyên is liberated, we should develop our attacks with two objectives in mind. The first and principle objective is to build up the major part of our B3 forces in the east; the second objective is to expand the liberated area in the plains of Zone V with available forces strengthened by Brigade 968, weapons and technical equipment. Hoàng Văn Thái, Lê Trọng Tấn and I are inclined towards the first alternative. I will request a Politburo response tomorrow.

Signed: Chiến."

That evening, the General Chief of Staff's Office sent telegrams to the Trị-Thiên Military Zone and Zone V to dispatch a regiment-size force immediately to the plains to coordinate with local armed forces and the population, occupy remote areas as well as the district center of Phú Lộc, cut off Highway 1, and prepare for attacks on Đà Nẵng.

On the following day, we received reports that the South's paratrooper division in Đà Nẵng was withdrawing to Sài Gòn and being replaced by the Marines Division. There were indications that the South intended to abandon the area from the north of Huế to the Hải Vân pass – signs of enemy regroupment throughout all of South Việt Nam. I conferred with the General Chief of Staff's Office to direct B4 and B5 to attack immediately, cut off Highway 1, shell Phú Bài Airfield, and prevent the South from pulling out and regrouping its forces towards Đà Nẵng.

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On the morning of March 11, after learning of the fall of Buôn Ma Thuột, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu held a meeting with Prime Minister Trần Thiện Khiêm, General Chief of Staff Cao Văn Viên, and General Đặng Văn Quang. Thiệu returned to an idea he had had after the signing of the Paris Agreement: "Better to lose land than coexist with communists". In other words, in a critical situation,

steps might be taken to abandon Tactical Zones I and II (Trị- Thiên, Tây Nguyên and the northern provinces of Central Việt Nam) in order to concentrate the South's defense on Tactical Zones III and IV, including the Mekong Delta. Thiệu sketched a plan on a battlefield map and said: "With the extent of our forces and military options, we cannot keep as much territory as we would like. We must re-deploy our forces so as to preserve populated and fertile areas which are indeed important to us."

Thiệu's strategy was tastelessly referred to as "small head, big bottom", The "upper" part, contiguous with the North, was a region considered both militarily and economically valueless; the "lower" part represented the prosperous Mekong Delta which supplied rice, fruit, vegetables, fish and shrimp to 75% of the people of the "Republic of Việt Nam".

In Thiệu's camp, there were objections to this strategy.

His solution, however, turned out to be a nightmare.

Returning to the issue of Buôn Ma Thuột, Thiệu requested "a defence to the death" and a retaking of the provincial town at any cost.

That same afternoon, Sài Gòn Radio and the Radio of "the Republican Army" clamored about "defending Buôn Ma Thuột to the death".

It was unfortunate, indeed, for French reporter Paul Léandri of AFP who announced the fall of Buôn Ma Thuột: the French journalist had to pay with his life for a prompt, accurate military report!

The AFP report was like a pail of cold water dumped on Thiệu's head.

Phạm Văn Phú, Commander of Tactical Zone II, sought to rescue the situation. A puppet soldier with the French two decades earlier, he was captured by our troops at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. He was now an ineffective general who enjoyed no confidence within military circles. Nevertheless, Thiệu backed Phú because the two men had once assisted each other in get higher grades.

Phú proposed that a meeting be held in Cam Ranh at midday on March 14 to discuss the situation in Pleiku, which was no longer safe. The meeting place was a villa that had been built specifically for a visit by US President Johnson in 1966. Attending the meeeting were Thiệu's three closest advisers: Trần Thiện Khiêm, Cao Văn Viên, and Đặng Văn Quang. The meeting was kept absolutely secret, even from US advisers.

The situation of the South's Army Corps 2 was very bleak. Buôn Ma Thuột was now virtually under communist control. All communications had been severed. Phú did not directly answer Thiệu's question of whether or not Buôn Ma Thuột could be retaken. Phú only asked for more troops and transport helicopters because it was impossible to send in reinforcements by land.

Phú's request was not met because there were no longer any reserve troops, and 200 of the enemy army's 400 helicopters had been shot down by the communists or could no longer operate on account of a shortage of spare parts.

Thiệu ordered Phú to pullout of Pleiku and Kontum, and deploy forces to retake Buôn Ma Thuột. The remaining units would withdraw to Tuy Hòa, where forces would be assembled to retake Buôn Ma Thuột.

Phú advocated a withdrawal along Highway 7 that would surprise our side. Highway 7 was a virtually forgotten, interprovincial road; it was in a state of disrepair, with all of its bridges collapsed. Obviously, the withdrawal of troops along a road that wound through mountains and forests – an operation without even minimum assistance from the General Chief of Staff's Office – was full of risks and dangers. Yet, it had to be undertaken because there was no other choice.

At the end of the meeting, Phú formally requested a last "favor" from Thiệu: promotion to the rank of major general of colonel Phan Văn Tất, commander of the commando forces of Tactical Region II.

Thiệu agreed, not knowing this was part of Phú'splan to flee and leave a substitute commander in his place. Immediately after

returning to Pleiku, Phú transferred power to "the new major general" Phan Văn Tất to direct the pull-out. Afterward, Phú fled Pleiku by helicopter under the pretext of protecting the new command headquarters in Nha Trang, leaving Tất and his troops in Tactical Region II to their fate!

While the Sài Gòn administration teetered on the brink of disaster, US and South Vietnamese newspapers announced the visit to Sài Gòn of a delegation of US Congressmen who would decide whether or not to provide US$800 million in additional aid to Thiệu. This mission, led by Senator Dewey F. Bartlett and Representative John J. Flynt, included eight people from the Republican and Democrat Parties, along with a dozen official staff and secret agents.

The Sài Gòn Administration arranged a thorough program for the US mission, allowing it to travel widely, including a visit to the "tiger cages" in Côn Sơn and a meeting with a "Việt Cộng" delegation at Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield.

After several days of meetings and close observation, the prevailing attitude among the US mission was unfavorable to Thiệu. With the exception of the delegation's two leaders, the remaining members of the mission seemed indifferent to the Sài Gòn administration's "doomed situation". Indifferent arrogant, showing no amiable attitude to the extent that Nguyễn Văn Thiệu was unable to restrain himself. At a March 1 dinner at the Independence Palace, he blurted, "The problem boils down to the simple question of whether or not US promises are still valid. This is the message I want you to convey to the US Congress."

Utterly disappointed, Thiệu bitterly added, "Allow me to commend our true friends on their sound views, and to repeat here the important idea that a gift is important, but the manner in which one offers it is even more so".

The March 1 dinner was the last great feast given at the Independence Palace. It was a bitter moment for Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, because not only was there concern over how to offer a gift, but also that the "gift" was never to be offered!

*Chapter VI*

# TURNING THE OFFENSIVE INTO A GENERAL OFFENSIVE

Exactly as forecasted, the Southern troops abandoned Kontum on March 16, Pleiku on March 17, and fled coastward along Highway 7. Upon learning of the withdrawal of the Southern troops, Văn Tiến Dũng ordered Division 320 to intercept them. He also ordered the Command of the Tây Nguyên Campaign to mobilize additional armored vehicles, trucks, guns and materials to enable Division 320 to pursue the enemy. In entrusting Division 320 Commander Kim Tuấn with the task, Dũng stressed: "At this moment, any hesitation, any lapse on our part, will ruin everything. It would be an unspeakable crime to let the enemy escape."

After receiving the order, Division 320 set out on the night of March 16. At dawn the following day, one of its units marched through the forests toward Highway 7, intercepted and destroyed the enemy at a point east of Phú Bổn, then marched on Củng Sơn. Meanwhile, two local troop battalions advanced to the Sơn Hòa bridge and joined the attack to liberate Củng Sơn. The Southern troops here disintegrated completely. We killed or took prisoner about 6,000 soldiers, seized hundreds of guns along with tanks, engineering vehicles, and lorries.

The Western press and radio broadcasts acted as a catalyst in the collapse of the Southern army and administration. The BBC gave a detailed account of the flight of Southern forces, magnifying the dismal picture of their defeat with reports of horrifying scenes in Pleiku, Kontum and on Highway 7. The Voice of America reported that the US Congress had overwhelmingly rejected additional military aid to the Sài Gòn

administration: 189 votes to 49 in the House of Representatives, and 36 votes to 6 in the Senate.

It was now a race against time.

On March 18, at a meeting of the Politburo, I directed the General Chief of Staff's Office to report on developments in the war and submit its views regarding our next course of action.

On the night of March 15, the Military Intelligence Department detected enemy activity in Trị-Thiên: Commando Intergroup 14 was moving to Quảng Trị to replace the Marines Division, a substantial part of which had been transferred already to Đà Nẵng. News of this triggered something that had been in my mind since our Buôn Ma Thuột victory: through our first major test of strength in Tây Nguyên, and after subsequent developments there, it was clear that the Southern army was much weaker now than prior to our offensive. The South had no hope of defending Trị-Thiên. They might try to assemble forces to defend the militarily strategic, even crucial, city of Đà Nẵng. The opportunity to develop our offensive, therefore, was substantial. Our two-year plan might be shortened, and the South might be liberated earlier than we had planned. Clearly, then, it was already possible to launch an offensive to liberate the city of Huế and the provinces of Quảng Trị and Thừa Thiên.

I shared these views with Hoàng Văn Thái, Lê Trọng Tấn, Cao Văn Khánh, Lê Hữu Đức and a number of other cadres in the General Chief of Staff's Office. All of them agreed with my assessments.

I intended to go to Vĩnh Linh where Lê Tự Đồng, Political Commissar-cum-Commander of the Trị-Thiên Military Region, was to discuss combat plans. Upon careful reflection, however, I realized that while developments on the various battlefields quickly transpired, my presence at Headquarters was necessary. Moreover, although I was to travel by helicopter, I would not be back in time to attend the Politburo meeting. It was reported that Southern troops had just pulled out of Pleiku and Kontum. I decided not to go. Instead, I sent this message to the Trị-Thiên Military Region and Army Corps 2:

"A possibility exists for us to shift to our opportunity plan[1] and liberate Huế. The situation is developing rapidly and our opportunities are emerging earlier than forecasted. The enemy is being forced to contend with us in the southern part of Tây Nguyên, in Zone V, and in Nam Bộ, and has started a strategic pull-back. In Trị-Thiên, we need to step up our main force attacks from the west, cut off between Huế and Đà Nẵng, and deploy forces to the plains. It is also necessary that we mobilize the masses, intensify our guerrilla war campaign, advance further on Southern interception lines, and combine our guerrilla activities in the plains with the aforementioned main force attacks from the west."

I also approved the plan of the General Chief of Staff's Office to issue instructions on organizing long-distance artillery emplacements to control Highway 1 from Trị-Thiên southwards, and to check Southern troop movements. To this end, a team of artillery cadres was sent to Trị-Thiên to strengthen our units and prepare them to fight the enemy along Highway 1 from Quảng Trị to Thừa Thiên.

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By the end of March 1975, the Tây Nguyên Campaign had ended in complete victory. Over 100,000 enemy troops were killed. Over 600,000 people from various ethnic groups in Tây Nguyên were liberated. Sài Gòn's strategic troops disposition in the South was threatened to be cut in two. The enemy defence line along the central coast was directly being menaced. Our victory in the Tây Nguyên Campaign marked a new decline for Sài Gòn, a turning point in military and political developments in the South.

On March 18, 1975, at the "Dragon House", the Politburo and Central Military Committee held a meeting. The Head of the Combat Operations Department reported on the overall military situation since the start of the Campaign. Everyone was

1. The plan for the complete liberation of Quảng Trị, Thừa Thiên and Huế City.

pleased to note that our offensive was developing more rapidly than scheduled.

Based on discussions we had about war developments in the South since the Buôn Ma Thuột battle, I stated that only ten days after the start of our offensive, we had destroyed a major part of the South's Army Corps 2 and liberated Tây Nguyên. There appeared to be efforts made by the South toward a major regroupment. The Southern army clearly had been weakened, however, and the balance of power had changed. In view of the South's quick decline, I went on, the United States does not dare act rashly or recklessly; therefore, US re-intervention is not very likely. We are currently at full strength, have concentrated forces, and possess a solid spiritedness. The Central Military Committee proposed that the Politburo make a decision to liberate the South in 1975 rather than waiting until 1976.

To carry out such a decision, the Central Military Committee made the following recommendation: Our main strategic objective would be Sài Gòn. In the near future, Trị- Thiên -Đà Nẵng would also be an important objective strategically. We should endeavor to liberate Huế-Đà Nẵng and the plains of Zone V, determine the best direction from which to launch a surprise attack, decide on the appropriate timing for such an attack and the number of forces to be involved. Divisions on the Tây Nguyên Front were to be sent quickly toward Sài Gòn. B2 was to be reinforced with two tank regiments, two artillery regiments and three anti -aircraft regiments. The Trị-Thiên Military Region and Army Corps 2 were to implement our opportunity plan as directed by the Army Command. Army Corps 2 was to set out at once. The activities of the various attacks must be flexible, the purpose being to encircle the Southern forces, and separate and destroy them. We must immediately smash the South's attempt to regroup much of its forces and thereby effect major changes in the war. The motto we used during combat went: *"Show daring, secure secrecy, timely take actions, and be sure of victory "*

Our forces in the Mekong Delta were to launch strong attacks, smash the South's "pacification" operations, and take over local territory and populations. We would also establish more district and

provincial battalions, training them for combat as well as for reinforcing various battlefields.

During an assessment of the possibility of US re-intervention, Lê Đức Thọ analyzed both the difficulties being encountered by the United States and the quick decline of the Sài Gòn administration. He concluded that the United States could no longer re-intervene. He approved the Central Military Committee proposal, commenting, "As Văn said, we have the capacity to win a complete victory in 1975. Our obstacles, however, concern organization, logistics support, and cadres."

Trường Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng and other members of the Politburo took the floor in turns, further analyzing the South's weakening position and considering effective approaches for future combat. All members agreed that we were facing an unprecedented opportunity and concurred with the Central Military Committee recommendation to pursue full, outright victory in 1975.

The meeting also looked closely at the situation in Nam Bộ. A report from B2 stated that, starting from March 10, 1975, the whole battlefield launched simultaneous attacks and insurrections in active coordination with Tây Nguyên. From Zone VI to Cà Mau, including its suburbs, our main forces, local troops, militias and guerrillas acted in coordination with popular mass uprisings to record resounding victories. In the Sài Gòn-Gia Định area, our urban forces and special commandos acted strongly. In the Mekong Delta, our troops and populations strongly spoiled the South's "pacification" plan, recording many successes.

Members of our meeting worked diligently. The First Secretary affirmed that the enemy had had many surprises: surprise because he could not sabotage the Paris Agreement as he had thought, encountering resolute resistance on our part; surprise on account of the scale and planning of our operations; surprise about the direction from which we launched our strategic offensive; and surprise at the very fact of his decline. With regard to subsequent developments, the First Secretary suggested that the South must be weakened in the very process of its regroupment, while still dispersed throughout Zone V, eastern Nam Bộ and the Mekong Delta. We must create three "fists":

main forces, rural attacks, and urban attacks. As it would be difficult to attack Sài Gòn, we must surprise the enemy using many of our main force divisions to wipe out their own main forces. The First Secretary did not fail to mention a propaganda campaign among enemy troops; it would be necessary for us to incite military riots via such a strategy.

The Politburo decided to turn our strategic offensive into a strategic general offensive, and complete our two-year plan (1975-76) in 1975 alone. The meeting ascertained that the main focus of our strategic offensive would be Sài Gòn. We would immediately launch attacks to destroy the entire Southern forces in Tactical Region I from Quảng Trị to Quảng Ngãi, and liberate Huế-Đà Nẵng. The Central Military Committee and the Army High Command would be responsible for organizing and implementing this resolution.

To avail oneself of very opportunity, and to intensify attacks in the context of armed insurrections and revolutionary wars – these acts have become hallowed traditions in the long and storied history of Vietnamese military arts.

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That same afternoon, I drove to Ninh Bình to entrust this task in person to Army Corps 1. I was accompanied by Lê Trọng Tấn, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, and Lê Quang Hòa, Deputy Head of the General Political Department.

Nguyễn Hòa, Commander, and Hoàng Minh Thi, Political Commissar of Army Corps 1, welcomed us at the Command Post. I was astonished to learn that a number of Army Corps units were busy building dykes. It was inappropriate to employ the strategic reserve force of the High Command this way. After witnessing this, I realized that not all people in our ranks were imbued with the spirit of our resolutions or the commitment of our gifted leadership.

I directed the Army Corps to verify preparations for embarking on combat, while Division 308 was left behind to defend against

any military reaction by Southern forces. I ordered the dyke-building units to return at once. The High Command would increase the Army Corps' firepower. Army Corps 1 was a strong main-force "fist" comprising units with significant combat experience. Together with the other main-force units of the High Command and the various military regions, it would help bring about decisive victories in the last stage of the war.

Absolute secret must be kept regarding our itinerary. Control, too, must be organized, while our troops had to march quickly, arrive in full strength, and be able to start fighting at the very moment an order was issued.

Afterwards, Tấn and I visited various units to personally encourage cadres and fighters before they departed on combat duty. The grand sight of the historic Tam Điệp area, where our Army Corps was garrisoned, reminded me of the remarkably quick march of the peasant hero Nguyễn Huệ[1] 200 years ago. I conveyed the Party's resolve to each unit and each man, and reminded them of their own integrity and responsibility at this historic moment.

As the entire Army Corps prepared to set out in a spirit of determination to fight and to win, there was virtually no sign of discouragement or trepidation to be found. There were only minor misgivings among cadres and combatants of Division 308 who would have to remain in the rear area and not be allowed to fight against the Southern army. Like everyone else, they dreamed of the opportunity to accomplish feats that were possible only once every thousand years.

After speaking further with Tấn, I sent the Trị-Thiên Military Region and Army Corps 2 a message conveying the Politburo's decision and directing them to begin implementing our opportunity plan.

During my trip, I ordered Đàm Quang Trung, Commander of Military Zone IV, to the Headquarters of Army Corps 1 for work.

1. Emperor Quang Trung, one of the three key leaders of the peasants' uprising in the Tây Sơn region, Bình Định province. This uprising led to the establishment of the Tây Sơn dynasty (1778-1802) in Việt Nam (Ed.).

After listening to him report on his situation, I asked him to make sure that the troops and people of Military Zone IV fully comprehended the Party's resolution. I then directed the Command of Military Zone IV to prepare the armed forces and people from Thanh Hóa to Quảng Trị for high combat readiness, and to extend all-out human and material assistance to our troops in the South as part of our strategic general offensive. The Commander of Military Zone IV, having been with the Việt Nam Propaganda Group for the Liberation Army from its difficult first days, accepted the task and promised to fulfill it. Although Đàm Quang Trung is no longer living, his passionate feeling remains indelibly in my mind.

Back at Army Headquarters, I sent Văn Tiến Dũng a message to explain several concerns that had taken shape in my mind while returning from Ninh Bình. I notified him about the assessment of the Politburo and Central Military Committee on our victory, the South's plan to strategically regroup and then muster forces to establish defence dispositions in and around Sài Gòn and the Mekong Delta. It was also possible, I explained, that in the near future they would try to set up the same type of dispositions in Đà Nẵng and Cam Ranh, with the hope of gaining time to arrange a political settlement or a solution providing for the isolation of apart of South Việt Nam. For this reason, we needed time of our own to create the biggest surprise to the enemy and ensure ourselves uncontested victory. The Politburo considered the various possible changes and decided to carry out the *Alternative one,* which had been forecasted earlier and provided for the dispatch of a major part of our Tây Nguyên forces to eastern Nam Bộ, the expansion of the liberated area in the plains of Military Zone V with the zonal presently available forces, which can be strengthened with Division 968 and technical weapons. My message also said Tấn would meet with Dũng, Võ Chí Công and comrades from B2 to inform them of the Politburo's new resolution and to give further suggestions on working out the implementation plan[1].

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1. Tấn did not make this trip because of the war's changes requiring his immediate attention.

On the morning of March 20, Technical Regiment 75 was notified that at 13h30 on March 19, Thiệu had sent Ngô Quang Trưởng a message which read in part: "Due to the shortage of air and naval backing, the South is allowed to support only one enclave. So carry out our dilatory operation to the Hải Vân line." Thus the South had decided to abandon Tri-Thiên-Huế in order to defend Đà Nẵng.

According to a Combat Operations Department report, on March 19 our troops launched an attack intended to liberate the entire Quảng Trị province. A large breach was created in the South's northern defence line, forcing them to pull back to the Mỹ Chánh River defence line. After exchanging views with Hoàng Văn Thái and Lê Trọng Tấn, I decided we had to launch a major offensive to smash the Thừa Thiên – Huế defence group. I ordered the General Chief of Staff's Office to direct the Trị-Thiên Military Region to send forces to the plains. I then had Army Corps 2 immediately cut off Highway 1 to prevent the South from regrouping its forces in Đà Nẵng. The Trị-Thiên Military Region and Army Corps 2 must then intercept their forces, cut off their operations, wipe out all of Division 9 and any supporting forces, capture all their equipment, completely liberate Trị-Thiên-Huế, and occupy Hải Vân pass. Naval Battalion 5 was to lay mines and block off the Thuận An entrance. Heavy strikes were to be undertaken in all directions in order to check the South's flight.

As the Trị-Thiên-Huế battlefield was relatively near, liaisons with our Headquarters were convenient. A telephone line linked the Defence Ministry-High Command with Army Corps 2 and Military Zone IV. The Deputy General Chief of Staff, the Heads of the Combat Operations Department and I usually spoke with our comrades on the battlefield at least twice a day. In many cases, the Army High Command gave orders by telephone.

On March 22, Lê Tự Đồng, Political Commissar-cum-Commander of the Trị-Thiên Military Region, and Nguyễn Hữu An, Commander of Army Corps 2, reported that we had inflicted heavy losses on the South's Division 1. They also explained that we were besieging Huế, so had cut off Highway 1 between Huế

and Đà Nẵng. Hundreds of motorized vehicles on their escape to Đà Nẵng became congested along this stretch. Our long-range artillery began shelling Phú Bài Airfield. The South had no other choice but to flee to the sea in the direction of the Thuận An and Tư Hiền estuaries.

The Central Military Committee expressed this top- priority message to Nguyễn Hữu An: "The Army Corps sends forces immediately to close the Thuận An estuary. Signed: Văn."

The order was carried out at once. Regiment 1 of Division 324 embarked on a march to intercept the enemy. The appearance of our main forces here had a very great effect from both tactical and psychological angles on the enemy. Tens of thousands of Southern soldiers along with hundreds of tanks and armored vehicles were quickly annihilated. The same sort of dismal enemy defeat witnessed on Highway 7 in Tây Nguyên was seen again on the way from Huế to the Thuận An estuary. The city of Huế had grown chaotic. Many remaining Southern troops looted the city as they fled. Signs of wide-scale disintegration appeared in their forces through all of Thừa Thiên-Huế.

In the face of these problems, the Military Committee sent a message to Văn Tiến Dũng explaining the developments in the Tây Nguyên Campaign: "The enemy has made it clear he intends to execute a major strategic withdrawal to defend Sài Gòn and the Mekong Delta. He is pulling out of Huế, and possibly Đà Nẵng... The Politburo has decided to undertake surprise, swift, and daring actions to carry out the strategic resolution regarding our main objectives. I have discussed with Lê Đức Thọ, and requested the views of Lê Duẩn. They are in full agreement with the use of forces and the development plan as described in your message... Encourage our cadres and fighters to show great resolve in their pursuit to destroy enemy live forces and liberate coastal provinces and cities, including Nha Trang and Cam Ranh. It is necessary for us to dispatch more cadres and equipment, quickly develop our forces on the spot, and organize them, as soon as possible, to initiate an attack against enemy strongholds. Signed: Chiến."

On March 15, 1975, by direction of the General Political Department, the Politburo sent this message to the Central Board and the Party Committees of Trị-Thiên Military Zone and Zone V:

"Closely combine the propaganda among enemy troops with combat operations, wipe out or break up substantial numbers of Southern forces, induce mass and collective surrender, deepen the contradictions and cause a high degree of differentiation in the enemy's ranks to concentrate our thrust on Thiệu overthrow. To get control over progressive groups and individuals among enemy officers to further our military and political requirements and to mobilize Southern soldiers".

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According to statements by prisoners of war and documents that were later made public, the South's internal situation at the time was something of a comic tragedy.

On March 18, in light of the Tây Nguyên disaster and the threat to Huế and Đà Nẵng, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu urgently met with his close advisers, ostensibly to discuss and resolve issues concerning refugees. The meeting, however, quickly shifted to the discussion of a more terrible problem: whether to abandon or try to hold Military Zone I.

Ngô Quang Trưởng's report on the planned Việt Cộng attack on Huế and Đà Nẵng so frightened the meeting's attendees that Thiệu and his "team" decided to flee to the safer environment of Sài Gòn and continue their discussions there.

They resumed their meeting at the Independence Palace. Trần Thiện Khiêm explained the difficulty of defending Huế and Đà Nẵng simultaneously, and suggested abandoning one. Trần Văn Hương believed that both Huế and Đà Nẵng would be too costly to defend. Ngô Quang Trưởng made the following proposal: as Highway 1 had been cut off and would not be reopened, three defence points, namely Huế, Đà Nẵng and Chu Lai, could be set up to resist the *Việt Cộng*.

Thiệu accepted Trưởng's plan in lieu of any alternative. Afterward, Trưởng returned to Military Zone I Headquarters.

On the following day, March 20, Trưởng flew back to Huế. Huế Radio reported: "President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu issued the order to defend the city of Huế at all costs." Trưởng, in the same spirit, vowed: "I will die with the old capital. The *Việt Cộng* will have to step over my dead body to enter Huế." He held a meeting with intellectuals in Huế to appease public opinion, then requested the General Chief of Staff's Office of the Southern army to deploy Air Brigade 1.

Everything was completed according to plan.

However, upon landing in Đà Nẵng, Trưởng could hardly believe his eyes when he was handed a message from Cao Văn Viên that explained the President's new order: "Army Corps 1 will deploy forces to defend Đà Nẵng only. Air Brigade 1 has received the order to move to Sài Gòn!"

Shocked, Trưởng phoned Viên in despair and requested explanations. He received this brusk reply; "Ask President Thiệu." In utter turmoil, Trưởng turned on the radio. Sài Gòn continued to broadcast the President's appeal to "defend Huế at all costs"! Apparently, none of Thiệu's civil servants had thought of returning to the Sài Gòn Radio station to update – or terminate – the broadcast!

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In those days, I was staying on the premises of our Headquarters without ever going home, even though it was only several hundred meters away. A small bed had been put in the room where I worked. In addition to the various maps hanging on the walls, I had also spread a military map of the South beneath a broad piece of glass on my table in order to follow and ponder over developments on the battlefields.

In the mornings, especially when the military situation was developing rapidly, Politburo members used to come to Army

Headquarters to receive information and exchange views. At this time, report followed report in quick succession. The military situation was changing in a matter of mere hours. Our Combat Operations Department had to issue new daily reports to enable the Politburo to get timely military information and consider appropriate maneuvers. Reports from the Trị-Thiên Military Zone and Army Corps 2 drove the red arrows on my map closer to Huế. The shells of our long-distance mortars had already fallen on Phú Bài Airfield and the Thuận An estuary. In Military Zone V, Division 2 along with local armed forces wiped out the district centers of Tiên Phước and Trà My, and expanded our base areas in the western part of Quảng Đà. Under our plans, the Division would liberate the whole of Quảng Ngãi province, or, if the opportunity arose, it would attack Tam Kỳ, and in coordination with the main forces of the High Command launch a direct strike against Đà Nẵng from a southward direction.

On March 24, 1975, a session was held between the Politburo and Central Military Committee. Reviewing the military situation since our March 18 meeting, it happily noted a series of favorable developments on the various battlefields. On behalf of the General Chief of Staff's Office, Lê Trọng Tấn projected a quick victory on the Trị-Thiên battlefield. Southern forces were fleeing toward Đà Nẵng. In April, we would have to launch swift attacks against Đà Nẵng, wipe out two to three Southern divisions, and prevent them from pulling out and reinforcing Sài Gòn.

Following Tấn's report, I broached the situation in Đà Nẵng and suggested steps to take after attaining victory there. According to the information we had, I said, the South had called for "a defence to the death" of Đà Nẵng. It was organizing plans to regroup and strengthen its military complex in order to put in check and generally delay the advance of our troops, while gaining time to consolidate its southern lines – pending US re-intervention. At this moment, we needed to forecast new military developments along with a possible Southern withdrawal from Đà Nẵng. If the enemy succeeded in fleeing southward, our general offensive on the main battlefield would encounter difficulties. We would then have to occupy Đà Nẵng quickly and annihilate all Southern live forces there. This would thereby

facilitate the later stages of our offensive. Southern troops might even oppose an order to "resist to the death", or they might withdraw either too quickly or too slowly. In the meantime, we must prepare for the eventuality of a premature Southern withdrawal, and be ready to launch quick attacks, prior to liberating Huế and starting with Đà Nẵng. Quickly occupy the heights, send tanks for in-depth attacks, and make the most of our artillery capacity to attack Đà Nẵng.

We had considered using seven divisions in the direction of Sài Gòn, yet we had nine divisions available now and the number might increase to 15 after Đà Nẵng's liberation. If we managed to occupy Đà Nẵng in April, Southern troops would be greatly demoralized. Thus we must set for ourselves this exceedingly high objective: *to liberate Sài Gòn during the month of May, before the beginning of the rainy season.* To prepare for our final, decisive battle, as well as to assemble numerous forces from the north, B2 must cut off Highway 4; this would effectively isolate Sài Gòn and introduce strong pressure from the southwest. Towards the northwest, it would be necessary for us to muster stronger forces, make efforts to gain more time, and accelerate the pace of military developments.

An atmosphere of utter elation suffused our meeting room. The Politburo stressed that our strategic opportunity had finally arrived. Not for 20 years had such a sizeable opportunity existed for us. The Southern revolution had accomplished various triumphs before, but this one was of nearly unprecedented significance. The meeting anticipated that total victory would be achieved much sooner than we had planned. It would be disadvantageous to prolong the conflict as the rainy season was fast approaching.

The Politburo asserted that our strategic general offensive began with the Tây Nguyên Campaign. *"The time has come for a new strategy."* Anew resolution was issued. We would have to firmly grasp the strategic opportunity, be efficient with whatever time we were allotted and concentrate our efforts on the country as a whole. We would also need to organize as quickly as possible the forces, weapons, technical and material means for

our main direction of attack, act quickly with a secrecy, allow the enemy no respite, and liberate Sài Gòn before the rainy season. As an immediate course of action, we would seek to destroy all Southern troops in Huế and Đà Nẵng, then commence our battle plan for the liberation of Sài Gòn-Gia Định.

On behalf of the Central Military Committee, and in an atmosphere of almost palpable enthusiasm and determination, I gave assurance that our troops would obliterate the Đà Nẵng military complex. I proposed that the Quảng Đà Front should open, and that we appoint Lê Trọng Tấn as Commander, and Chu Huy Mân as Political Commissar, for the Command of the Front. My proposal received unanimous approval. The Politburo also decided to establish an Army Corps 3, consisting of those units which had just fought in Tây Nguyên; the Commander would be Vũ Lăng, with the Political Commissar being Đặng Vũ Hiệp.

On March 25, 1975, just as the meeting ended, our troops were reported to have entered Huế at 10h30. In compliance with the order of the Army High Command, the armed forces of the Trị-Thiên Military Region and the troops of Army Corps 2 simultaneously attacked and overran the enemy defence lines from three directions, forming many thrusts around Huế. To the south, Army Corps 2 shifted its direction of attack, penetrated deeply into enemy lines to cut off Highway 1, then occupied Phú Lộc's district center and blocked off the enemy's retreat to Đà Nẵng. Division 1, the strongest of the Southern army, suffered heavy casualties. From the north, our troops marched on the Thuận An estuary while a local force detachment intercepted the Tư Hiền estuary. From the west, across Highway 1, additional detachments crossed the Tả Trạch River, quickly encircling the enemy. On the night of March 24, our artillery units intensively shelled the Vanguard Command Post of the South's Army Corps 1 at Mang Cá, and subjected the Thuận An and the Tư Hiền estuaries to a fierce shelling as well. On the morning of March 25, our troops attacked the Tân Mỹ- Thuận An harbor area and destroyed or dissolved all of the enemy's retreating forces which had been hemmed in here. Other main force and local troop thrusts entered the city. On March 26, simultaneously with mass uprisings, our troops completely liberated the ancient capital of

Huế. Atop the Flag Tower in front of the Ngọ Môn Gate, our red and green flag, with its golden star of revolution, fluttered in the wind victoriously.

Our quick, clear-cut triumph in the Trị-Thiên-Huế battle, which resulted in the annihilation and dissolution of Division 1 (regarded once as a combat-tested division of the Southern army), represented a resounding victory for us. Our triumph not only dealt a heavy blow to the Southern strategy of regrouping in the coastal area of Central Việt Nam, but it also created a serious threat to Đà Nẵng and drove their army into irremediable collapse.

The Central Military Committee sent a message of commendation to the troops of the Trị-Thiên Military Region and Army Corps 2: "The liberation of Huế and Thừa Thiên province is a victory of great strategic and political significance".

On March 26, the Army High Command sent Giáp Văn Cương as an envoy to Đà Nẵng to prepare the implementation of the Politburo's decision. I convened Lê Trọng Tấn[1], Nguyễn Bá Phát[2], Cao Văn Khánh[3], Phan Bình[4], Lê Hữu Đức[5], and a number of other comrades to discuss our plan of attack on Đà Nẵng.

An experienced commander, Tấn had prepared a combat operation project.

"When we attack Đà Nẵng," I said at the beginning of the meeting, "one of the two following situations may arise: either the enemy will take to flight or he will rally to 'defend to his death. So how do you propose we fight?"

"The enemy is preparing to 'defend to the death' here," Tấn replied. 'We have to organize a coordinated attack with various army formations to be certain of victory. Five days will be required to convene a meeting of the party committees, assemble troops, coordinate our various arms and become combat ready."

1. The newly-appointed Commander of the Quảng Đà Front.
2. The Navy Commander.
3. Deputy Chief of the General Staff.
4. Head of the Army Intelligence Department.
5. Head of the Combat Operations Department.

Tấn spread across our table a large map showing the plan for a five-day attack. Red arrows indicated the directions from which we would attack, the fire-emplacements aimed at our military targets in the city and surrounding area.

While everybody stood around the map and eagerly discussed the five-day attack, I considered the plan in a rather different light. The South had called for a "defence to the death", but sudden, unexpected developments were possible, and they might even engage in a withdrawal. I knew that we must prepare a plan for launching quick attacks in accord with the motto *"diligence, boldness, and surprise strikes."*

I turned to Tống Trần Thuật, Deputy Head of the Military Intelligence Department. "If the enemy chooses to pull out of Đà Nẵng," I said, "how many days do you expect their withdrawal to take? Reflect on this carefully tonight and report back early tomorrow morning."

At 6h00 a.m. on March 27, all our meeting attendees had returned to Army Headquarters.

As soon as the meeting started, Thuật reported that the South's withdrawal would take three days at the very least.

"It would take the enemy four or five days to withdraw!" proposed Nguyễn Thanh, Head of the Bureau on Researching the Enemy.

I disagreed with Tấn's proposal to prepare for a five-day attack, nor did I agree with Thanh's calculations. I offered a concise analysis, pointing out that if the enemy followed through with its vow to "defend to the death", we might need to prepare for a fight lasting five days, a week, or longer. But sudden developments could happen, and a quick attack needed to be planned. I suggested that we draft plans for the prospect of a three-day withdrawal by the South.

Tấn maintained his views, however, explaining, "It's impossible to prepare to fight like that."

"As you are the Commander of the Front," I said somewhat bluntly, "1 let you issue orders. Otherwise, I would order an attack

on Đà Nẵng within three days of preparation. If the preparations were to be made in five days, it could happen that the enemy would have pulled out completely. What then? Huế has been liberated. In spite of possible enemy artillery and naval bombardments, let our infantry march along Highway 1 and directly attack Đà Nẵng. And we will also launch an attack from the south along Highway 1. No meeting of the Party committees was to be held, only messages were to be exchanged."

That was the first and only time that I showed discontent with Lê Trọng Tấn, one of the most outstanding commanders in our army, and someone I had always loved and appreciated.

Tấn did not say anything in response, but strictly complied with the order. Later, he approached me. Openly and cordially he recalled our discussion about the proposed duration of our attack, and admitted his oversight. He was so loyal and frank, so deserving of my esteem!

Not long after that, the Standing Board of the Central Military Committee met with and issued directives to the Quảng Đà Front Command. In my capacity as the Secretary of the Military Committee, I explained that the war had quickly entered a new stage of development. Although the South's military disposition in Đà Nẵng was not yet changed, and in spite of his calls for a "defence to the death", the morale of his troops had lowered. We needed to actualize our motto: *boldness, timeliness, and surprise strikes.* In other words, we had to pursue the next stage of the conflict confident of victory. We would be required to besiege and destroy the enemy, maintain control over the city's airfield and harbor, secure for our side this city and its one million inhabitants, and implement to our best ability the policy on prisoners of war, surrendered enemy soldiers and war booty. It was necessary to strengthen our forces quickly and march toward the South. I advised Tấn to report regularly to the High Command, then wished him success and victory.

Tấn immediately set out, flying to Gio Linh by helicopter and then driving along the Trường Sơn road to the Headquarters of Army Corps 2. He and his escort set up a command post west of Đà Nẵng.

I sent Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân, who was in Quảng Ngãi at the time, a message informing them of the Politburo's decisions to establish the Quảng Đà Front and appoint its command. Mân, the Political Commissar of the Front, was to hand over the task of Military Zone V target strikes to local troops, then assemble our main forces along Highway 1 and attack Đà Nẵng in the quickest, timeliest and boldest manner possible – exactly as I had directed our forces following the South's withdrawal from Pleiku.

The Commander and the Political Commissar of the Quảng Đà Front worked together by radio. The General Chief of Staff's Office was instructed to utilize all of its communication equipment and follow closely the movements of our forces, already dispatched to the Front, as well as to help the Command of the Quảng Đà Front direct our various thrusts of attack.

In his message sent at 8h30 on March 26 to Chu Huy Mân, Lê Trọng Tấn wrote:

"In our attack on Đà Nẵng:

-An[1] will attack in the north and the northwest along Highway 1 and across Highway 14.

-711[2] will advance from the southwest and immediately destroy Brigade 369.

-You are to prepare Division 2 and Brigade 52 to strike along Highway 1 towards Mỹ Khê (east of Đà Nẵng) and to prevent any naval retreat by the enemy."

Mân's response appeared as follows:

1. Concur with the intentions of "Vũ"[3].

2. We have prepared for Division 2 and Brigade 52 to strike from the south, mainly in the direction of Mount Quế to Vĩnh Điện;

1. Army Corps 2 Commander Nguyễn Hữu An.
2. Codename of Division 304.
3. Codename of the Army High Command.

a secondary prong will follow Đèo Le road across Mount Mạc toward Highway 100, coordinating with the forces of "Vũ" to destroy the enemy in Đà Nẵng.

3. Active preparations are being made to establish an artillery emplacement capable of shelling Mount Quế by March 29 at the very latest."

The following day, March 27, Tấn sent this message to Mân:

"In reply to message 320. 16h00.

"1. Fully agree with the direction and targets of attack for Divison 2 and Brigade 52.

"2. An's forces, with support from a few divisions of Hòa[1], are to attack along two axes:

"- Along Highway 14, via Mũi Trâu and Lệ Mỹ, into the main airfield.

"- From Lăng Cô to Hải Vân, Liên Chiểu, and Nam Ô. Simultaneously, an attack will be launched from Lộc Mỹ to the top of Hải Vân Pass to destroy Brigade 258.

"3. The forces of 711 will attack Regiment 57 in Đại Lộc, then circle behind Brigade 369.

"4. Our artillery units have set up an emplacement at Mũi Trâu to shell the main airfield, Sơn Trà Harbor and various naval vessels. We also intend to deploy a long-barreled gun emplacement to shell Nước Mặn Airfield. Our aims would be best served if we possessed 85- mm caliber guns to fight enemy naval crafts arriving for troops at Mỹ Khê."

During this period, the Standing Board of the Party Regional Committee and the Command of Military Zone V held an expanded meeting under the chairmanship of Võ Chí Công. A decision was made to completely liberate the military zone within a short time. The primary, immediate task we faced was to organize all of our

1. Army Corps 1 Commander Nguyễn Hòa.

forces to accelerate their attacks, wipe out the South's Division 2, liberate the provincial town of Tam Kỳ and the whole Quảng Ngãi province, cut off and completely isolate the Southern troops, and create a springboard to attack and destroy the last stronghold of the South's Army Corps 1 in Đà Nẵng.

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After our March 25, 1975 meeting, Lê Đức Thọ proposed to visit the B2 battlefield with Phạm Hùng and Văn Tiến Dũng. Together, they would lead our Campaign to liberate Sài Gòn. The Politburo approved, and Thọ left on March 28.

Before he left, I spoke with him about carrying out the Politburo's decision to completely liberate the South before the rainy season began.

The Politburo also decided to set up a Council of Support to the South, chaired by Phạm Văn Đồng. Twenty years ago, Đồng had presided over a similar council to mobilize the forces of the whole country and win historic victory in the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign. Such an event would be repeated now, but on an even greater scale and against greater odds. Some of our challenges included galvanizing populations and the overall strength they represented, mobilizing enough material and human forces in the Northern rear area to support the Southern frontline during the final stage of the war, and winning complete and total victory.

At 18h00 on March 25, 1975, the Central Military Committee sent the following message to Trần Văn Trà, the Southern Military Committee, and Phạm Hùng, Secretary of the Party Central Board:

"Our strategic general offensive started with the victories in Tây Nguyên and other battlefields. As forecasted, our combat operations have entered a stage of swift and forward development. Our victories in the Huế-Đà Nẵng and Nam Bộ sectors have led to the rapid collapse of the enemy and brought about new military and political developments, especially on the

main battlefield, all of which have happened much sooner than expected. Our great strategic opportunity is upon us. Therefore, it is necessary that we play for time at the highest degree, to muster forces in the main direction, to take bold, surprise actions, to carry out as soon as possible the great strategic decision of the Politburo.

"Directives have been issued to Tuấn. The situation is very new, among our cadres, the knowledge of the situation has not changed in conformity with the requirements. It is necessary to make the situation known to all echelons, and to concentrate forces on the main targets. To carry out the 'three fists' strategy. Signed: Văn"

At 19h00, the Military Committee sent this message to Văn Tiến Dũng:

"The Politburo and the Central Military Committee have just met to assess the situation, and held that: the B3 campaign has recorded a great victory, the general strategic offensive has started. This is a turning point in the military and political situation in the South. The revolutionary war has entered the stage of development by leaps and bounds... The situation in the main theater will develop much more quickly than expected, especially in case we manage to wipe out many enemy live forces in Huế and Đà Nẵng and the Mekong Delta... The great strategic opportunity has arisen. We need to quickly muster forces in the main direction, take bold, surprise actions and complete the task in the main area as soon as possible. Victory may come much earlier than planned. The weather conditions are good; it is not advantageous to dillydally. The Politburo has decided to carry out the following:

"A. To quickly organize three main-force divisions – the main technical units in the Buôn Ma Thuột area – to stand ready to enter the main field of battle.

"B. To liberate Bình Định (from the direction of Highway 19), then move down the coast to do the same in Phú Yên, Khánh Hòa, Nha Trang, and Cam Ranh. In the direction of Highway 7, to use only local forces for an advance on Tuy Hòa. In the

direction of Highway 21, to develop our operations eastward and, depending on our options and opportunities, advance on Nha Trang and Cam Ranh.

"The Politburo and Central Military Committee decided to open the Đà Nẵng Front and set up the Quảng Đà Command.

"The Council of Support for the South was set up under the chairmanship of Tô[1].

Wishing Đinh[2] a quick recovery,

Signed: Văn."

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Let us return for a moment to the Đà Nẵng battlefield.

Division 304, its ranks depleted after the Thượng Đức battle, was being consolidated here. After a briefing we had one evening, I sent this message: "Division 304 should try by every means possible to liberate Đà Nẵng. At this juncture, any delay is a crime."

I then called Cao Văn Khánh and told him to immediately send a message immediately to Army Corps 2, enjoining it to muster forces for an attack on Đà Nẵng after the remaining Southern forces, still resisting, had been destroyed. I also ordered that we closely follow the march of Army Corps 1 (with the exception of Division 308). Leaving Division 308 in the North to serve as a strategic reserve force caused some worry among our forces. On March 26, Hoàng Kim, Political Commissar of the Division, informed the High Command of Division 308's wish to participate in combat. With keen sympathy for the fighters of Division 308, I wrote them this message:

1. Phạm Văn Đồng, the late Prime Minister.
2. Đinh Đức Thiện, at that time the Head of the General Department of Logistics in the Việt Nam People's Army.

"Division 308 has been assigned a task of paramount importance. Explain to your troops what a guard division of the revolution represents to our war efforts at this juncture. Prepare and ready your Division to fulfill any task the Motherland requires. Division 308 is responsible for a very important part of this strategic battle!"

Following our victory in Buôn Ma Thuột, the Huế - Đà Nẵng battle represented our second major blow against the South's army. Although we had liberated Huế, there remained another critical target: Đà Nẵng.

Đà Nẵng was the second largest city in South Việt Nam. It possessed a very strong military complex along with the seat of the command of Tactical Region I and of Army Corps 1. Đà Nẵng Airfield was a major air base. Đà Nẵng was also militarily and economically important. In March 1965, the first American units landed in Đà Nẵng, ushering in the era of South Việt Nam's US "local war" strategy.

In Đà Nẵng, the South had about 100,000 men, including 15 main-force batttalions associated with Infantry Division 3, the Marines Division, and the remaining forces of Division 1 and 2 of the Commando Intergroup, along with dozens of civil guard battalions, hundreds of civil guard platoons, civilian defences, and, 5,000 policemen; it also boasted 373 aircraft of various types in Airforce Division 1, seven artillery battalions, and Armed Cavalry Group 11. Moreover, a Southern naval force was stationed in Đà Nẵng's military harbor and its adjacent territorial waters.

After the fall of Huế, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu ordered Ngô Quang Trưởng to defend Đà Nẵng at any cost in hopes of checking the advance of our troops and turning the city into a landing area on the off-chance that US troops returned to rescue them. Of course, Thiệu's order for a "defence to the death" no longer had the same effectiveness as before!

In March 1975, our troops started restraining the enemy and carried out feinst in Zone V. We attacked the Sủng Mây Ammunition Dump, Xuân Triều Vehicle Park, and destroyed the Trắng Bridge near Đà Nẵng. In mid-March, complying with High

Committee and the Party Committee of Military Zone V decided to organize forces to destroy the South's Division 2 and liberate all of Quảng Ngãi province and most rural areas in Quảng Đà province. Under the command of Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân, the armed forces and populations in Military Zone V intensified their attacks and uprisings in the northern part of the military zone, advanced rapidly to Highway 1, and prepared for another advance from Quảng Ngãi to Đà Nẵng. Constantly menaced by our troops, Southern forces pulled out of Sơn Hà and Trà Bồng, and the surrounding area of Quảng Ngãi province were completely liberated. The local population rose up, seizing control of their lands. In coordination with liberation forces, they liberated Quảng Ngãi, the town of Tam Kỳ, and Tuần Dưỡng Base. They also captured Chu Lai Base, wiped out the South's Division 2, broadened the liberated areas in Quảng Đà province, and threatened Đà Nẵng from the south.

On March 27, by Army High Command order, Army Corps 2 and a division of Army Corps 1 developed their attacks in two directions in the northern part of Đà Nẵng: from Mũi Trâu Pass they marched northwest along Highway 14, then followed Highway 1 from Phú Lộc to capture Thừa Lưu, Cầu Hai, Lăng Cô, and Hải Vân Pass, eventually reaching the northern approaches of the city. Division 304 received direct orders from the Army High Command and Army Corps 2 to attack Đà Nẵng from the southwest.

During this period, by order of the High Command, Division 2 and the artillery, anti-aircraft, tank and armored vehicle forces of Military Zone V advanced directly towards Đà Nẵng; under direct command of Chu Huy Mân, they bypassed various targets along their way. Our artillery began shelling the harbor and airfield.

Facing this critical situation, the South's Ngô Quang Trưởng reversed a plan to withdraw the Marines Division to Sài Gòn and instead rallied his troops to retrench themselves in Đà Nẵng. But it was too late! Đà Nẵng had been plunged into utter chaos. The South still had numerous troops, but its soldiers were demoralized. New recruits deserted en masse. Commanders, panic stricken, sought to transport their wives and children away to safety. As tens

of thousands of people poured in from Huế, the chaos in Đà Nẵng only increased.

After the Military Intelligence Department reported on the latest war developments, I sent another message to Army Corps 2.

"The enemy in Đà Nẵng is in a state of utter chaos. The police have stopped enforcing the rule of law. The enemy regiment on Mount Quế has received the order to pull out and destroy its fortifications. It is imperative that we launch a swift attack against Đà Nẵng. If the enemy shows signs of withdrawal, our attack must be started at once. If they try to retrench themselves, we must tightly encircle them to prevent any future withdrawal. At the same time, our forces must concentrate on Highways 1 and 14 in order to destroy the enemy quickly, occupy the western and northwestern areas of the city, penetrate deeply into the Trịnh Minh Thế Bridge area, and check the enemy's retreat across the Sơn Trà peninsula. Signed: Văn."

On the same day, March 27, the First Secretary sent a message to Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân.

"Our glorious victory in Buôn Ma Thuột and Tây Nguyên enables us to liberate Đà Nẵng. We must now organize our forces to attack from the directions of Thừa Thiên-Huế and Quảng Nam-Quảng Ngãi. By doing so, we will be able to annihilate enemy live forces in Đà Nẵng and prevent those who flee from regrouping to defend Sài Gòn.

"In this stage of the war, time will equal force. We need to take the boldest possible actions, create the greatest surprise to the enemy, and allow the enemy no time for counteraction. You must immediately employ our forces in the Military Zone and throughout the province to strike at Đà Nẵng. Special steps must be taken to ensure our quickest advancement; our occupation of airfields and harbors; and our encirclement, isolation, and destruction of enemy forces.

"We also have to mobilize local masses into armed uprisings; smash the forces of Southern coercion at the grassroots level; wrest control of public services, storehouses and factories; set up a

revolutionary administration; persuade Southern troops to give up their weapons and surrender; and totally dissolve all Southern military units.

"Our northern main-force formations have worked out plans to coordinate attacks with our southern wing. Take action immediately. Signed: Ba."[1]

At our Army Headquarters, the departments of combat operations, military intelligence, information, cipher, and all of our cadres were working night and day. Quick, successive reports of victory spurred everyone to work fervently, forgetting meals and sleep.

On the morning of March 28, I called in artillery commander Doãn Tuế, who was at that time an envoy of the General Chief of Staff's Office exploring the possible applications of firepower.

"What have our artillery forces accomplished?" I asked.

"Only one battalion of Military Zone V has shelled Đà Nẵng Airfield," Tuế replied. "And only two companies of the Army Corps 2 artillery have arrived at Mũi Trâu Pass."

The development of the Campaign artillery was thus too slow.

I ordered the immediate placement of guns at Mũi Trâu Pass to pressure Đà Nẵng Airfield; the transport of Army Corps 2 artillery pieces to Hải Vân Pass for the shelling of Sơn Trà; and the deployment of all artillery forces on the frontline to participate in the attack.

At 17h00 that day, all artillery units of Army Corps 2 and Military Zone V, after organizing final gun emplacements, started shelling Đà Nẵng. On the following morning, March 29, we launched an intense artillery bombardment. From 5h00 to 10h00, 30 heavy guns shelled the South's Army Corps 1 Headquarters, Đà Nẵng Airfield, Mỹ Khê Harbor, Sơn Trà peninsula, and Nước

1. Lê Duẩn. *Thư vào Nam* (Letters to the South). Sự Thật Publishing House, Hà Nội, 1985, pp. 381-382.

Mặn Airfield. Following this, we refocused our shelling on the water ridge to prevent Southern ships from rescuing their surviving troops.

According to a report issued by the Command of the Quảng Đà Front, on March 29,1975, Army Corps 2 attacked Đà Nẵng from the north, northwest and southwest, while Division 2 of Military Zone V attacked from the south and southeast. With the backing of commandos, self-defence forces, underground guerilla forces, and the local masses, both wings attacked the city. A number of our cadres, Party members and fighters who had been detained by the South at Non Nước, broke out of jail and joined the combat. Under the leadership of the Quảng Đà Provincial Party Committee and the Đà Nẵng Municipal Committee, the local masses rose up. By their own initiative, they offered buses, Lambretta vehicles, and motorbikes to our troops to enable them to enter the city more quickly. They also provided water, rice, and cakes to our troops. As our main-force combatants were unfamiliar with the city and its environs, they were guided by self-defence forces. Where our main forces were unable to arrive on schedule, commando, self-defence and guerilla forces, in combination with the local residents, took over. Workers defended the airfields, harbors, and factories. Civilians joined with our troops to force the South's soldiers to surrender.

It had been reported that the President of the United States would be sending naval forces to rescue Đà Nẵng. After considering this development, I sent a message to Tấn[1], Mân[2], Phạm Hùng[3] and Army Corps 2.

"Ford has announced the deployment of LSTs to Đà Nẵng both to appease US public opinion and, if possible, to rescue the puppet troops on the Sơn Trà peninsula. It is unlikely that the puppet air force will take action, and even less likely that the US air force will intervene. Still, however, we must guard against such an eventuality."

1. and 2. Lê Trọng Tấn and Chu Huy Mân were lieutenant generals in the Việt Nam People's Army.
3. Former Prime Minister of the Việt Nam Government.

As it turned out, events happened in just this way. US naval vessels, arriving to rescue the fleeing Southern troops, anchored far off-shore. In the *sauve-qui-peut* that ensued, many people fell into the sea. US helicopters, attempting to transport US advisers and Saigonese leaders to safety, were swarmed by thousands of soldiers and civilians desperate to escape. Left behind, many people clutched to the outside of the helicopters during take-off. Lifted into the sky, they eventually lost their grips and plummeted to their deaths.

Within 32 hours, our troops had successively struck the military, civilian, and economic targets in the Southern complex, completely liberated Đà Nẵng and Hội An, and killed or wounded over 100,000 men in the local military and administrative apparatus.

At noon on March 29, Nguyễn Thanh arrived to report on the situation facing the South. Recalling the day when I entrusted Lê Trọng Tấn with the task, I said by way of a joke: "I should give you five marks[1], but instead I'm giving you three because the attack on Đà Nẵng only took three days!"

Our second strategic blow was phenomenal.

It was yet another leap forward in the course of our general offensives and uprisings during the historic Spring of 1975.

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The offensive for the liberation of Huế-Đà Nẵng, under the direct leadership of the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command, took shape in the process of carrying out the general offensive, and quickly developed into a large scale campaign of great strategic significance. Following the Tây Nguyên victory, our resounding triumph at Huế-Đà Nẵng smashed to pieces the South's design to establish strategic retrenchment and

1. The top academic mark, or grade, according to the Soviet system that Việt Nam employed.

also resulted in the destruction of a significant part of their main live forces. Moreover, it radically tipped the balance of forces in our favor, drove the Southern army to a rapid collapse, and created sound prospects for our final battle.

On April 1, the Central Military Committee sent this congratulatory message to its troops on the Quảng Đà battlefield:

"The Central Military Committee warmly commends all cadres, fighters, Party members, youth union members of the main-force and local troops, and the elite troops and self- defence units on the Quảng Đà Front for their strict compliance with orders received, and for their bold and contributory actions. In coordination with the population, they have, in a very short period of time, wiped out or dissolved all enemy troops, liberated the entire province of Quảng Đà together with Đà Nẵng city, which was an enemy military base of prime importance in South Việt Nam.

The Central Military Committee commends your military merits and your brilliant exploits. Signed: Văn"

The Politburo, National Assembly, and Government warmly commended our troops and populations on their impressive military victories and awarded them lofty orders.

On March 30, a group of our cadres was sent to Đà Nẵng to research the way of combat of our main forces to prepare for the forthcoming decisive battle.

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At the most critical moment, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu received a letter dated March 22, 1975 from the US President:

"Dear Mr. President Thiệu,

"The current attack of North Việt Nam troops against your country is a great trouble and a great suffering for everybody.

"For the United States, the problem is no less critical... The Americans are also tested when they are resolved to help a friend

under attack by modern armed forces... I personally have decided that the Americans will defend Việt Nam in this decisive hour with the intention to carry out the responsibility of the United States in this circumstance. I am closely following the developments and having urgent discussions with my advisors on the actions required by the circumstances and allowed by the law. Signed: Gerald Ford."[1]

Always a vague tone and no specific commitments! In such an emergency, the coded letter after deciphering remains cold! Moreover, the expression "allowed by the law" was a new pail of cold water thrown on the Thiệu Administration: it is public knowledge that when Nixon was President, his relationship with Congress regarding the Việt Nam War was not smooth. On November 30, 1974, the law on the *President's Authority in Wartime* (WPA) was enacted. It clearly stipulated that the President must notify Congress before taking any military action, and within 48 hours report on that action in detail.

At that time, President Ford obviously could not act without the approval of Congress. And as the Congress was about to recess for the Easter holiday, all business had to be postponed!

The following evening, Thiệu sent this desperate appeal for help:

"Mr. President,

"At this decisive minute when South Việt Nam was in danger and peace under a serious menace, I have the honor to request the US Government to carry out its promise... One, to order a short-term concentrated B52 bombing on the troop stationings and logistic bases of the enemy in the areas pertaining to South Việt Nam. Two, to afford an urgent aid on the necessary means to check and repulse the attack...

"Mr. President,

"Once again, I appeal to your Excellency, to the Trust in the US diplomatic policy, and especially to the conscience of the United

1. Nguyễn Tiến Hưng and Jérold Schecter. Op. cit., p.381.

States... I thank you for showing a resolve to fulfill this promise by Your specific action...

Yours faithfully,

Nguyễn Văn Thiệu".[1]

Of course, Thiệu's plea fell on deaf ears. The March 22 letter was the last Ford sent to Thiệu. Its effect was like that of an analgesic given to a man in the throes of death.

While US Secretary of Defence Schlessingher was raising the only remaining solution – an atomic bomb – the President who had ascended to power after the Watergate scandal found himself in a dilemma: B52 bombardments had been prohibited by Congress, and atomic weapons were even more unthinkable. President Ford could do no better than spend a week playing golf.

Đà Nẵng fell just as Easter recess began.

For the United States, Đà Nẵng was no longer an important strategic position. Despite this, however, a group of 20 Japanese cargo ships along with three small naval vessels was dispatched to Đà Nẵng to evacuate US advisers, South Vietnamese officials, and other panic-stricken people whose aims were to escape. Included among them was General Ngô Quang Trưởng.

1. Op. cit., p. 391.

*Chapter VII*

# THE START OF THE BATTLE OF SÀI GÒN

The enemy defences in the North had been completely broken. The path leading to the last bastion of the Sài Gòn regime was now largely open.

On the afternoon of March 29,1975, immediately prior to the liberation of Đà Nẵng, the First Secretary sent this message to the Central Board for the South: "The military situation is changing rapidly. The revolution in the South is entering a stage of accelerated, intensive development. In fact, the campaign for the liberation of Sài Gòn may be regarded as having started from here."[1]

Our victories, won in quick succession, spread as if part of a chain reaction and further weakened the South's army and administrative apparatus from the center to its lowest level. Time at that moment was calculated not in terms of months but of days. The disposition of people's war with forces on the spot in each battlefield, each region, proved the ability of our troops to attack the enemy at their own initiative more rapidly than the US transport by helicopters and airlift. Everywhere, the Southern forces were attacked, encircled, and cut off from one another. Our overall strategy of combining an armed, political struggle with propaganda among enemy forces caused the enemy to be stretched too thin, broken up, or annihilated.

On the morning of March 31, the Politburo held a historic, expanded meeting to discuss our third strategic blow – what would be our final general offensive and uprising.

1. Lê Duẩn. Op. cit., p. 383.

An atmosphere of elation flooded the "Dragon House" Everywhere one turned, one saw beaming faces, glittering eyes, and congratulatory handshakes.

At the beginning of the meeting, Lê Duẩn introduced the issues for discussion. On behalf of the Central Military Committee, I reported on last month's overall military situation, emphasizing developments in the latter half of March. From Tây Nguyên, Huế, and Đà Nẵng to the southernmost part of Trung Bộ and Nam Bộ, our army and people wiped out or dissolved two strong South Vietnamese main-force army corps and about 40% of their modern technical formations; captured or destroyed over 40% of their material and logistic installations; and liberated two military regions, including 12 provinces comprising nearly half of the South's entire population. The South's design to strategically regroup went belly-up. They were in utter disarray. Nevertheless, they obdurately set up a line of defence extending from Phan Rang southward. It was their hope to put in check and resist our offensive, holding on until the advent of the rainy season, and afterwards consolidating their remaining forces, counterattacking, and retaking areas they had previously lost.

In Phan Rang, the South herded two divisions comprising the newly reconstituted Infantry Division 2, Paratrooper Division 2, and Commando Intergroup 31 which was backed by Air Division 6 stationed in Thành Sơn airfield. At the same time, they made every effort to rally their remaining troops, reorganize their remaining units, and reformulate their disposition in the attempt to strengthen the defence of the Sài Gòn-Gia Định area and the Mekong Delta.

With regard to our side, we had started our general counteroffensive with the Huế- Đà Nẵng battle. Our troops were in a spirit of victory. We were in a position to muster enough of the whole country to overwhelm the enemy on the main battlefield – Sài Gòn. *Our great opportunity had arisen.* We felt assured of total victory in our final battle. I proposed working out a combat plan to encircle the eastern and western areas of Sài Gòn-Gia Định, put to use our "main-force fist", and launch a surprise, penetrating thrust to annihilate the enemy and win

victory in a single battle. Our motto was *"great speed, audacity, surprise, and certain victory".*[1]

The Politburo members agreed with the Central Military Committee's proposal. Trường Chinh was excited with the proposed thrust, referring to it as *"percée stratégique".*

The meeting unanimously agreed that new elements had clearly emerged during the Đà Nẵng battle. We possessed a markedly superior strategic position to the enemy, as well as superior military and political strength. The United States could not possibly save the South Vietnamese even if it sent reinforcements. The Politburo affirmed our resolve *to start a general offensive and uprising in the shortest time possible.*

Our mode of combat relied on the strength of our three strategic blows. We would employ them as we attacked from the outside in combination with local forces fighting from the inside, thereby availing ourselves of the opportunity to win successive victories.

With regard to the disposition of our strategic forces, the Politburo advocated a quick strengthening of our troops to the west of Sài Gòn, dividing the enemy into parts and achieving a strategic encirclement toward the southwest, cutting Highway 4 and isolating Sài Gòn from the Mekong Delta. The eastern forces were to occupy important target areas and encircle Sài Gòn from the direction of Bà Rịa, Vũng Tàu. Our "main-force fist" must be strong in the way of weapons and technical means, and ready to launch direct strikes against the most important enemy targets in the center of Sài Gòn when the opportunity arose. In the Mekong Delta, the military and political forces were to undertake intensive activities, liberating various locales in coordination with the main front.

At this stage, it was necessary to work out a plan of action involving our forces presently on the eastern Nam Bộ battlefield. Our forces in Tây Nguyên, we realized, must advance into the main battlefield. The General Chief-of- Staff's Office must ensure that Army Corps 1 set out to arrive without delay.

1. In Vietnamese, "Thần tốc, táo bạo, bất ngờ, chắc thắng"

The meeting ended.

The First Secretary immediately sent a message to the battlefield.

"Our revolution is developing at a pace in which we call 'one day equals 20 years'. Accordingly, the Politburo has decided that we must carry out our general offensives and uprisings and bring the war of liberation to a victorious end in the shortest time possible. It is best to commence and conclude these in April, without further delay. We must act with prodigious speed, boldness and secrecy. We must pass to the attack precisely when the enemy is in disarray and demoralized. It is necessary that we muster even greater forces against our main targets in specific locations and at specific moments.[1]"

From March 31, 1975, the Sài Gòn regime was doomed. The resolve of the Politburo inspired revolutionary ardor of the whole Party, army and people.

All of our efforts were reserved for the victorious day.

Nam Bộ and the southernmost part of Trung Bộ stepped up their offensives and insurrections, ready to seize this historic opportunity. Along various strategic axes, our large troop columns converged quickly on the main battlefield. From the newly liberated Tây Nguyên mountains and forests, Army Corps 3, with its technical weapons, marched toward Sài Gòn confident of victory. From our rear area in the North, Army Corps 1 marched Southward night and day. Our newly established eastern column advanced down Highway 1 along the coast. Our rear area mobilized human and material resources to support the frontline. In our offices at Army Headquarters, the clock hands seemed to swing more quickly, and everyone had come to deeply value time. The days seemed so much shorter now.

After our Politburo meeting, I pondered often over the imminent combat we faced on the main battlefield – Sài Gòn – Gia Định. On April 1, after engaging in analyses and discussions

1. Lê Duẩn. Op. cit., pp. 387.

with Deputy Chief of General Staff Cao Văn Khánh and Head of the Combat Operations Department Lê Hữu Đức, I sent a message to B2:

"Just as the Politburo assessed, the revolutionary war in the South is developing by leaps and bounds. We now possess plentiful forces and have in our grasp the possibility of winning total victory in a much shorter time than had been expected.

"Our major objectives are to seize strategic opportunities and strive to undertake our offensive on Sài Gòn by mid-April. This will be the most effective way for us to ensure victory. The secrecy no longer relates to the target that we would attack. The enemy certainly knows that we will attack Sài Gòn, but he has estimated that we will need one or two months of preparation. Therefore, the secrecy now lies mainly in our timing. On the one hand, we need to transport our forces at remarkable speed. On the other hand, we have to use our available forces immediately and not wait to assemble a precise number of them before taking action. It is with this in mind that the Politburo has asserted that from this very minute, the strategic battle for Sài Gòn has started.

"Between our two basic alternatives – one, to start a prolonged siege in order to develop necessary conditions for victory; and two, from the outset launch a daring offensive to achieve swift victory – it now appears advisable to choose the second alternative. We will have to act boldly and quickly while preparing to shift, if necessary, to our first alternative. Either way, our aim is to win outright victory in a short amount of time. Using our available forces, it is necessary to act quickly to avail ourselves of opportunities resulting from the South's disarray and demoralization, and to launch successive attacks, win successive victories, and thwart all South Vietnamese attempts to reorganize their forces and receive and administer increased US aid.

"The time we had to pursue our opportunity must now be measured in days. We had to attack with extraordinary speed in the certainty of total victory".

After our April 2 briefing, the Central Military Committee sent an urgent message to the Regional Party Committee and the

Command of B2 based on an analysis of developments across the various fronts.

"1. While preparing for final victory, we need to work out immediate plans to assemble big guns and, to some extent, tanks and infantry necessary for annihilating the defeated soldiers in disarray, destroy part of F.18, occupy Xuân Lộc, and advance close to Biên Hòa. If we manage to directly threaten Biên Hòa Airfield, the South's air force will lose its effectiveness and Sài Gòn will be thrown into utter disarray."

In addition to technical reports issued by our Military Intelligence Department, the Việt Nam News Agency obtained accounts written by foreign reporters in Sài Gòn, supplying us with added information on developments.

The Central Military Committee sent another message to Phạm Hùng, Văn Tiến Dũng and Trần Văn Trà.

"2. Sài Gòn has become panic-stricken. Political changes may soon occur within the South Vietnamese ranks. With their destruction on the Cam Ranh-Phan Rang Front, the numbers of surviving Southern troops that pour into the city will create serious problems.

"3. In the spirit of the Politburo's bold, timely action, we suggest that the Central Board and Regional Military Committee work out a plan to act immediately with the forces we now have. Their plan would be based on Trần Văn Trà's first-stage plan, but carried out with greater speed and strength while not permitting a reversal of the current military situation.

"4. a. In the east, our objectives are: to assemble a strong force of tanks and artillery pieces; immediately attack F.18; destroy Xuân Lộc; advance to the immediate approaches of Biên Hòa; deploy heavy guns to threaten Biên Hòa Airfield; occupy Ô Cấp[1] if the opportunity arises or if new forces become available; and cut off the Lòng Tàu River.

1. Vũng Tàu.

"b. In the west, with the forces we now have available, our objectives are: to entrust the encirclement of Mộc Hóa to our local troops while our main forces in the region and military zone launch quick, intensive attacks on Highway 4; isolate, then encircle the South Vietnamese troops. We must also consider plans for carrying out further troop reinforcements.

"c. The military situation may develop quickly. Brigade 9 needs to be in the hands of the Central Military Board, who will be ready to act when the opportunity arises. It is not advisable to move the unit to another direction before the arrival of new forces.

"5. Meanwhile, we must carefully prepare plans for taking further action with increased forces and weapons."

Knowing that our comrades in the region badly needed additional forces for the main battlefield, I informed Trà that the Central Military Committee had requested Văn Tiến Dũng to dispatch forces from Tây Nguyên as soon as possible. Army Corps 1 and various technical units were also sent to reinforce B2.

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Various reports provided us with the following information:

While our troops marched towards Sài Gòn, South Việt Nam's General Chief of Staff's Office calculated that our side would send, at most, one army corps to eastern Nam Bộ. They also determined that the dispatch of this force to the battlefield would take at least two months. US Defence Secretary Schlesinger regarded the loss of Đà Nẵng as a main battle but comparatively small. As for US President Gerald Ford, he would later write in his memoirs that everyone knew the problems in South Việt Nam were very serious, but nobody seemed to be aware of just how critical the situation really was.

Reviewing his forces, Thiệu backed a plan to preserve all of Military Zones III and IV, establish a defence line from Phan Rang southward, and retain Tây Ninh as the main defence direction from which they would counter our troops' thrust into Sài Gòn.

He also advocated defending Highway 13 and Xuân Lộc township to prevent the *Việt Cộng* from approaching Highway 15 and Nhơn Trạch where they could engage in artillery bombardments against Sài Gòn.

On April 2, Cao Văn Viên, General Chief of Staff of South Việt Nam's army, clamored about defending the area from Phan Rang southwards. Đồng Văn Khuyên, the General in charge of logistic supplies, declared: "The areas from Ninh Thuận southwards must be defended at all costs. If necessary, all forces will be used in these battles!"

Thiệu sent Nguyễn Văn Toàn, Commander of Army Corps 3, to defend Phan Rang. He also ordered that efforts be made to restore a number of troops that had fled from areas in the north, and to consolidate the defence line around Sài Gòn. In the meantime, Thiệu was secretly sending gold and precious stones to Taiwan and Canada. Toàn also directed Nguyễn Vĩnh Nghi to set up a frontline command in Phan Rang while he himself retreated, allegedly "to strengthen Xuân Lộc".

The US President ordered the US Army Chief of Staff to Sài Gòn to obtain information about new developments. He brought with him a final dose of analgesic, which consisted of a number of heavy guns unloaded at Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield before cameras and in broad daylight; the maneuver was broadcast on television.

However, this awkward and deceptive move was practically useless. The fact of the matter was that the South Vietnamese army needed ammunition more than guns. And these artillery pieces could not possibly substitute for the B52 bombing begged for by Thiệu. Frederic Wayen, a four-star general who had had to roll down the flag and withdraw from South Việt Nam in March 1973, could do nothing more in the face of Thiệu's despair. His only obligation was "to consider what the United States could do to support South Việt Nam", then he would return to the United States and report to President Ford – who was on holiday.

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Let us return for a moment to Nam Bộ and southernmost area of Trung Bộ.

The report of the Military Party Committee of the Region and the B2 Command disclosed information on the implementation plan for the second phase of the Regional Command's 1974-1975 dry season campaign, which had been approved by the Central Board.

From March 9 to 10, 1975, in coordination with other fronts throughout South Việt Nam, our army and people from the mountains and forests of Zone VI to the Mekong Delta launched simultaneous attacks and uprisings on the way to resounding victory.

In the Mekong Delta, the army and people of Military Zone IX wiped out two enemy reinforcement battalions, destroyed Hựu Thành Subsector, besieged Thầy Phó, Subsector, liberated Thuận Thới Subsector, and destroyed Cầu Sắt Post. The enemy garrison in Thầy Phó Subsector took to flight. Pursuing attacks in the direction of Tam Bình, we wiped out Ba Kè Subsector; took control of the Mang Thít River section and Highway 16; threatened Highway 4; annihilated 50 South Vietnamese posts; and approached Vĩnh Long. Supported by our main forces, troops and guerillas from Vĩnh Trà liberated Càng Long, Châu Thành, Cầu Ngang, Trà Cú, Duyên Hải, and Cầu Kè. The Trà Vinh Provincial Party Committee and their troops forged three additional battalions, organized political forces, carried out propaganda among enemy soldiers, and sent weapons and cadres into the provincial town to mobilize its citizenry and prepare for an insurrection that would lead to the seizure of power. On March 12, our troops occupied Bình Minh Subsector, destroyed Mỹ Thuận Subsector, liberated the area north of the Hậu River, and positioned 105-mm guns at a point north of Cái Vồn to shell the headquarters of the South's Army Corps 4 and Trà Nóc Airfield. Division 4 wiped out the Ông Tháp Post, occupied Bà Đầm Base, besieged Ô Nai and Ô Môn, and prepared for an attack on Cần Thơ. In Military Zone III, our troops destroyed two enemy battalions on Ngã Sáu Base, smashed the system of enemy posts in the area of Kênh Mới and the Nguyễn Văn Tiếp B Channel; they also opened a broad, liberated area from Cái Bè district (Mỹ Tho) to Mỹ An and Kiên Văn (Sa Đéc), annihilated South Vietnamese

forces north of Cái Lậy, cut off Highway 12, and besieged Mỹ Tho. In the direction of Kiến Tường- Long An, our troops opened the Tây Ninh corridor to Đồng Tháp Mười, established control over abroad area of Vàm Cỏ Đông River's western bank, cut off Highway 4, and created a springboard from which to attack Sài Gòn from the west. Group 232, under direct command of Deputy Zonal Commander Lê Đức Anh, prepared to strike Sài Gòn from the west and south.

In eastern Nam Bộ, commando detachments, underground work teams, and special commandos approached key positions around Sài Gòn, wiping out the enemy at Phú Hòa Đông and destroying South Vietnamese posts on Highway 8, in Tân Thạnh Tây, Tổng Thôn, and Thới Mỹ, as well as the command post of the battalion in Tân Túc. Moreover, these forces compelled enemy surrender or retreat from a series of posts along the corridor to the interior of the capital city, while destroying the toxic chemicals storehouse in Thủ Đức and the Vũng Bèo gasoline storehouse. Division 9 intensified its attacks on Tri Tâm Military Sector, liberated Dầu Tiếng and Bến Củi districts, and wiped out the Suối Ông Hùng Position. It also occupied Cầu Khởi, killing or wounding over 3,000 enemy troops; destroyed or captured 61 military vehicles, six artillery pieces, and 1,000 rifles of various kinds; liberated the town of An Lộc and the whole of Bình Long province; and created a foothold for our troops to attack the last enemy position from the northwest. Eastern Nam Bộ managed to open liberated zones stretching from northern Tây Ninh to Lộc Ninh, Dầu Tiếng, and Chơn Thành; from Mỏ Vẹt to Tánh Linh and La Ngà (via Hoài Đức); and from Highway 1 to south of Highway 2 and Bà Rịa.

Thus, within one month, the army and people of Nam Bộ and the southernmost part of Trung Bộ, fighting in coordination with the Tây Nguyên and Trị-Thiên-Huế battlefields, destroyed or dissolved a vast number of enemy live forces. They also managed to liberate broad areas of the Mekong Delta as well as parts of eastern Nam Bộ and Military Zone VI, encircled the South Vietnamese forces, and enabled various columns of troops to prepare attacks on Sài Gòn-Gia Định.

The activities of our people and army fighters against the enemy "pacification" attempts quickly developed. The political struggle and propaganda South Vietnamese troops underwent a powerful growth. Throughout the Tiến and Hậu rivers area, thousands of skirmishes with the enemy broke out. People rose up, exposed the enemy's crimes, and meted out punishment. Barrages were built up across rivers to intercept South Vietnamese warships and cut off important waterways – two examples of which were the Mang Thít Channel in Vĩnh Long and the Xáng Xẻo Rô south of Rạch Giá. Youths eagerly enlisted in the army; as a result, the armed forces in the plains quickly grew in number. The citizenry rendered services to the army and joined local revolutionary organizations.

On March 29, 1975, based on the information from the Politburo and Central Military Committee, and from the messages sent by the First Secretary and Central Military Committee regarding main battlefield realities, the Central Board for the South issued Resolution 15-TWC:

"The revolutionary war in the South is developing at a fast pace, and the opportunity has finally arrived for us to prepare a general offensive and insurrection against the enemy's lair. *From this very moment, the final strategic battle of our army and people has started.* We will accomplish the national democratic revolution in the South and reunify the country ."

The Resolution stressed the need to strengthen our leadership over the uprising of the populations to support the military offensive. It stated: "It is necessary to carry out concentrated attacks every hour, every day, and every month from the beginning of April 1975." This resolution evidenced the ability and clear-sightedness of B2's leaders, and was complied with by various localities.

Implementing the Resolution of the Central Board, the Military Committee and the Regional Command worked out a plan to attack Sài Gòn with the forces available to us. This plan provided for an attack inside the city from five directions: the eastern direction was to be covered by Army Corps 4; the northwest by Division 9 and Regiments 16 and 271B; the west by

Corps 232, which comprised Divisions 5 and 3/B2, and the brigades of this unit; the south by Regiments 88 and 21 of Military Zone VIII; the north by the Gia Định Regiment, which was to be reinforced, if at all, with special commandos, commando units and troops sent in from the Center. The Military Committee and Zonal Command advocated annihilating South Vietnamese forces in Xuân Lộc; bringing pressure to bear on Biên Hòa; having Corps 232 prepare to occupy Mộc Hóa; sending forces to cut off Highway 4; and acting in combination with the main forces of Military Zone VIII to wipe out Divisions 7 and 9 of the South. Achieving these steps would create significant military and political changes in South Việt Nam's army and administration. Seizing this opportunity, we would mobilize the people to rise up, combine military attacks with mass insurrections, launch attacks from both the inside and the outside of Sài Gòn, and target five main enemy areas: Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, the General Chief of Staff's Office, the Capital Special Zone, the General Department of Police, and Independence Palace. This plan was approved by the Central Board and submitted to the Center.

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It was the later half of March 1975.

Immediately following our Tây Nguyên victory, the Campaign Command ordered various main force units to develop attacks along Highways 19, 7 and 21 in the coastal plains of southern Trung Bộ. Division 10 advanced along Highway 21, wiped out the paratrooper brigade on the Phượng Hoàng Pass and liberated Khánh Dương district center. After the liberation of Củng Sơn, Division 320 marched against Tuy Hòa along Highway 7. Division 3 of Military Zone V destroyed the enemy base in An Khê and, in coordination with Division 968, wiped out a substantial part of the South's Division 22 in a battle extending from Phú Phong to Gò Quánh Airfield. The remaining units of Division 22 crumbled under the strikes of Bình Định's army and people.

On March 27, at a meeting with the Tây Nguyên Command, Văn Tiến Dũng announced the establishment of Army Corps 3,

which would comprise Divisions 10, 320 and 316. This event marked a new development with our army, which was growing increasingly strong as a result of our strategic offensive's success.

Behind a powerful offensive and insurrection, our army and people battled South Vietnamese forces throughout the central coastal provinces, obliterating or breaking up all remaining enemy troops, and liberating various cities and provinces in Military Zone II. On April 1, our side liberated Bình Định and Phú Yên provinces, along with Quy Nhơn City and the town of Tuy Hòa. On April 2 and 3, Khánh Hòa province was liberated along with the city of Nha Trang and Cam Ranh Military Harbor. Prior to this, on March 24, Quảng Đức province and the town of Gia Nghĩa were liberated.

The deployment of Division 10 of Army Corps 3 was a memorable event. As mentioned earlier, the Central Military Committee's policy (approved by the Politburo) after the liberation of Đà Nẵng was to muster all forces in southern Tây Nguyên to advance rapidly into eastern Nam Bộ. On his way to B2, Lê Đức Thọ made this policy decision known to the Tây Nguyên Command. Prior to this, however, while our troops were pursuing South Vietnamese forces, Văn Tiến Dũng and the Tây Nguyên Command had ordered Division 10 to advance down to Nha Trang and Cam Ranh, along the sea. When learning of the policy decision of the Politburo and Central Military Committee, they were filled with doubt and concern: were they acting at variance with the idea of their higher levels? Finally, they decided to report to the Center that they would comply. Văn Tiến Dũng sent me a message about this issue, pointing out that our operations were developing favorably. The Division could complete their task of liberating Nha Trang and Cam Ranh, two important strategic targets, then advance to Highways 11 and 20 before arriving without great delay at the eastern Nam Bộ regroupment position.

After receiving Dũng's message with its news of Quy Nhơn's liberation, the South's withdrawal from Tuy Hòa, and his preparations to quit Nha Trang and Cam Ranh, I sent this reply message: "We have discussed the matter with Lê Duẩn and agree that we must turn this specific opportunity into an

advantage, namely by organizing and deploying Division 10 to annihilate the South Vietnamese paratroopers and other remaining forces, then to occupy Nha Trang and Cam Ranh before marching southwards..."

My message put these comrades at ease. At 8h00 a.m. on March 31, Dũng sent me this message: "I am very glad. That was indeed a full agreement between the leadership and we soldiers in the field. .."

The use of Division 10 in this way proved to be a sound decision. After liberating Nha Trang and Cam Ranh, this Division from Ba Ngòi quickly passed through Bác Ái Base to Highway 11 and Tuyên Đức. It then advanced along Highway 20 to the regroupment position of Army Corps 3 in the direction of Sài Gòn, completing the task that had been entrusted to it with outstanding results.

While Army Corps 3 rushed into the main battlefield and attacked the enemy, Army Corps 11 was traveling from the North along Highway 1, then down the eastern and western Trường Sơn roads and Highway 14. Army Corps 11 overcame the many difficulties posed by bridges, roads and weather conditions, and marched with the speed and strength of a torrent pouring into the South. Along the way, the Army Corps, organized into several formations, traveled on motorized vehicles under anti-aircraft cover. Night and day, through the mountains and forests of Trường Sơn, convoys of vehicles and guns followed one another with a resolve to reach by mid-April the regroupment position in Đồng Xoài and join the fight before it ended. Our strategic reserve formation set out, bringing with it the rear area's firm confidence in victory and adding a new "steel fist" to the final battle's main battlefield.

During this period, Division 7, along with part of Division 341 and local forces, occupied Định Quán Military Subsector, destroyed the important Gia Ray sector, and established control over Highway 20. On March 28, Division 7 advanced on motorized vehicle units along Highway 20 and, in coordination with area forces, liberated the town of Lâm Đồng before occupying the Di Linh Plateau with support from the Zone VI troops. On April 4, the

Division occupied the city of Đà Lạt. Regiment 812 pursued the enemy from Đà Lạt to Thành Sơn Airfield, creating conditions for Division 10, in Cam Ranh, to march along Highways 11 and 20 across Bác Ái and into eastern Nam Bộ. In the direction of Bình Tuy and Long Khánh, Division 6, backed by local troops and guerillas, liberated Highway 4 and attacked the enemy on Highway 1 from Suối Cát to Rừng Lá (Bình Tuy).

Up to then, our troops had wiped out or dissolved two South Vietnamese army corps and two strong military regions, liberated Tây Nguyên, the Central delta provinces, and many other areas in the Mekong Delta and eastern Nam Bộ. Sài Gòn-Gia Định, moreover, was virtually encircled.

On April 3, Văn Tiến Dũng and Group A 75 arrived at the Regional Military Headquarters, followed by Đinh Đức Thiện and, a few days later, Lê Đức Thọ. On April 7, 1975, the Central Board ratified our plan of attack on Sài Gòn-Gia Định.

It was reported later that the meeting was chaired by Phạm Hùng, Secretary of the Central Board. The combat plan, expounded by Lê Ngọc Hiền, provided for two stages: as an immediate step, from April 8 onwards, an attack would be launched with the aim of attaining a strategic cutting off and encirclement of Sài Gòn; a "shaking" battle was carried out against the suburban area of Sài Gòn and eight targets inside the city in preparation for our general attack. In favorable circumstances, if our enemy fell apart, a penetrating "thrust" would be coordinated with mass uprisings in order to occupy the city.

The second stage, lasting from April 15 to 20, would see Sài Gòn attacked from five directions. The forces we planned to use included three to five main-force divisions, seven special commando groups, 60 commando teams, guerilla forces, and around 50,000 people planning to stage an uprising. Trần Văn Trà reported on the terrain in the Sài Gòn vicinity, the enemy disposition inside the city, and the state of their air and naval forces. He pointed out that the annihilation of South Việt Nam's Division 18, combined with the encirclement and isolation of Sài Gòn, would "shake" their entire disposition so that a new opportunity would arise for us. If the enemy attempted to

regroup, our troops would be reinforced, but everything had to be settled in April. Trần Văn Danh, Trần Lương, Nguyễn Văn Xô, Phan Văn Đáng, Đồng Văn Cống, Lê Văn Tưởng, and Đinh Đức Thiện agreed with the plan. They proposed that the plan's secrecy must be achieved, logistic supplies ensured, efforts to agitate enemy troops stepped up, and greater attention paid to the organization of military control over the city. Võ Văn Kiệt voiced his firm confidence in victory and stressed the immediate need to bring our main force units deep inside the city, persuade the masses to rise up, and win swift victory in order to keep the number of casualties as low as possible. Nguyễn Văn Linh pointed out the need for continuous attacks so as not to give the enemy any respite. With enthusiasm and a high sense of responsibility, they analyzed the current situation and detailed specific components of the plan.

In his conclusion, Phạm Hùng expressed agreement over the attack plan. After cutting off Highway 4 and annihilating Division 18 of the South's forces, our attack was to be launched at once; there would be no need to wait for all our forces to arrive. Coordination and consolidated leadership would be essential for our victory. It was decided that further discussions with Lê Đức Thọ would be held regarding command organization.

Văn Tiến Dũng took the floor on behalf of the vanguard body of the Central Military Committee and High Command. He happily noted the agreement of the Central Board and Regional Military Committee concerning the plan of attack on Sài Gòn. He stressed that with our relatively new military and political superiority over the South Vietnamese, we had to achieve victory as quickly as possible. He said that a proposal had been sent to the Politburo and Central Military Committee to speed up the dispatch of additional forces to the main battlefield.

The following day, at a working session with the Central Board and Regional Military Committee, Lê Đức Thọ briefed us on the Politburo's Resolution on the current military situation, South Việt Nam's designs, our stance, and informed us about the April 6 Decision of the Politburo on the establishment of the Command of the Sài Gòn-Gia Định Campaign: Văn Tiến Dũng was to be

Commander; Phạm Hùng, Political Commissar; Trần Văn Trà, Lê Đức Anh, Lê Trọng Tấn, and Đinh Đức Thiện, Deputy Commanders; Lê Quang Hòa, Deputy Political Commissar and Political Director; Lê Ngọc Hiền, Acting Chief of Staff. Lê Đức Thọ joined both the Central Board and Frontline Party Committee. Nguyễn Văn Linh was appointed Deputy Secretary of the Central Board, and would be responsible for the masses' insurrection movement, especially in Sài Gòn. Võ Văn Kiệt, standing member of the Central Board, would lead the takeover of Sài Gòn.

The Party Committee and Campaign Command diligently set out to work. Right from the start, they unanimously agreed to propose to the Central Committee that this impending, decisive campaign would be named after Uncle Hồ.

On April 14, 1975, following the proposal of the Campaign Command and the wishes of compatriots and fighters countrywide, First Secretary Lê Duẩn, on behalf of the Politburo, issued this message: *"It has been agreed that the Sài Gòn Campaign will hereafter be called the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign."*

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On April 9, in accordance with the plan, we launched the attack on Xuân Lộc and commenced to cut off Highway 4 west of Sài Gòn.

Division 5 unsuccessfully attacked the South's forces at Thủ Thừa townlet and Tân An township. However, it managed to inflict heavy losses on a South Vietnamese infantry regiment of Division 7 and an armored regiment, destroyed 80 large and small posts, liberated a broad area, and threatened Highway 4. The armed forces of Military Zone VIII established intermittent control over the Tân Hiệp-Cái Bè (Mỹ Tho) highway. Military Zone IX's armed forces attacked the enemy at Cái Vồn and Ba Càng (Vĩnh Long).

In the east, Army Corps IV, under the command of Hoàng Cầm, Commander, and Hoàng Thế Thiện, Political Commissar, launched an attack on Xuân Lộc – the "steel door" on the defence line of Sài

Gòn and Tactical Region III. Here, the enemy positioned a fairly strong force which comprised Division 18 and a number of civil guard battalions as well as police who had retrenched themselves behind solid fortifications. The US Army Chief of Staff, General Frederic Wayen, maintained that "the loss of Xuân Lộc would mean the loss of Sài Gòn". Lê Minh Đảo, Commander of Division 18, loudly clamored about a "defence to the death" at all costs.

The battle was fierce and unfolded in a complex way.

According to reports, on the night of April 9 to 10, behind several thrusts of attack, our troops broke through the defence line of the main town, capturing several targets and hoisting the revolutionary flag atop the residence of the enemy's provincial governor. In spite of heavy losses, South Vietnamese forces tried to resist. On April 10, they used helicopters to land a paratrooper brigade in the township's vicinity, then sent in two marine brigades, an inter-group of commandos, an infantry regiment of Division 5, eight artillery battalions, and two columns of tanks and armored vehicles. Relying on reinforcements and air support, the South launched frantic counterattacks, causing us huge losses. Several positions captured by the Liberation Army had to be abandoned, or were under the control now of the Liberation Army now of the puppet troops. The South deployed bombs with enormous destructive power.

The battle dragged on, not clearly in anyone's favor.

The situation was extremely pressing.

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After the liberation of Đà Nẵng, Lê Trọng Tấn, Commander of the Quảng Đà Front, flew to Hà Nội to assume a new task under orders of the Army High Command.

On the morning of April 2, the General Chief of Staff's Office reported that the enemy had fallen into utter disarray. The military situation along the coast of south Trung Bộ had developed rapidly in our favor.

Tấn proposed setting up a coastal column comprising the forces that had just liberated Đà Nẵng. This column would quickly advance, wipe out the enemy, seize control over strategic positions from Nha Trang southwards, and prevent the enemy from gathering in Sài Gòn. This proposal was seconded by the Standing Board and the Command of Military Zone V and by the Standing Board and the Command of Army Corps 2, which had just won important military victory in Đà Nẵng.

I approved the proposal and directed Tấn to detail it to Lê Duẩn. After discussing the proposal further with me, Lê Duẩn expressed his agreement.

The Standing Board of the Central Military Committee and the Army High Command quickly set up the eastern column; it consisted of Army Corps 2 (minus Division 324, which remained in Huế), Division 3 (Military Zone V), and various anti-aircraft artillery, tank and engineering units. This column's task was to fight its way through enemy troops, arriving in time to join our other units in the liberation of Sài Gòn. Lê Trọng Tấn was appointed Commander of this column, with Lê Quang Hòa serving as Secretary of the provisional Party group. After arriving in eastern Nam Bộ, this column would be placed under command of the Party Committee and the Command of the Sài Gòn Front, and report regularly to the Army High Command.

Before Tấn left, I, on behalf of the Standing Board of the Central Military Committee, directed the eastern column to advance along Highway 1 and break through enemy lines in Phan Rang, then to join our B2 forces in occupying Ba Rịa and Ô Cấp, putting pressure on enemy forces around the Lòng Tàu River. In order to threaten important targets in Sài Gòn, long-range artillery was to be positioned in Nhơn Trạch or Thành Tuy Hạ. Plans were also to be made for crossing the river and penetrating deeply into the center of the city. Due to long distances, the march of our troops must be well organized, with light units advancing ahead. The march must be quick; precautions would have to be taken against shelling by South Vietnamese naval craft. Our troops should protect the local residents' life and property, lead troops to observe discipline in their contacts with the population, and extend humane treatment to

prisoners-of-war and wounded enemy soldiers. The column would establish contact with Dũng upon arriving at its destination.

The historic advance of Quang Trung-Nguyễn Huệ came back to mind. On April 4, I sent this message to the officers and fighters of Army Corps 2 concerning their march: "You are setting out on the path of glory. You must act *with remarkable speed and courage, while keeping the secrecy and the certitude of victory.*"

On April 6, a message from the Central Military Committee to the Command of Corps 559 explained that "Supporting and ensuring the mobility of our forces in B2 are our primary tasks. Therefore, effective organization must be carried out, especially in ensuring proper dispatch of our various units, weapons, technical materials and ammunition according to our schedule." I directed Đồng Sĩ Nguyên to establish his command post in Quy Nhơn, and Hoàng Minh Thảo to establish his in Nha Trang. They would organize the units' march along Highway 1, with the aim of avoiding any adverse impact on the logistic supply for the units marching.

That day, the Central Military Committee sent a message to Đồng Sĩ Nguyên and the Standing Board of the Party Committee of Corps 559, stressing:

"The requirements of the Front are extremely pressing with each passing day and each passing hour. *Time for us is now strength.* Take every measure to organize the expeditious march of all units, provide all necessary support, and fulfil to the best of your ability all of the tasks entrusted to you in this campaign."

Behind the organizational efforts of Corps 559 and the aid of Military Zone V, along with the sheer physical effort of traveling on foot and transporting all available supplies, our various units overcame all difficulties on the two main axes – Highway 1 and Trường Sơn Road – opening new roads as they fought their way forward. Local inhabitants helped repair the roads. Motorized ferries from the army engineers, along with boats procured from the general populace, were used as substitutes for bridges that had been destroyed by the South Vietnamese. Damaged vehicles were repaired or trailed at all costs.

On April 7, I gave the following order to those units pouring onto the battlefield:

"1. *Speed, still greater speed. Courage, still greater courage.* Avail yourselves of every hour, every minute, march forward to the front and liberate the South. Fight resolutely and win total victory.

2. Convey this message immediately to all Party members and fighters."

The pace of our march was accelerating consistently. Still, it seemed too slow! Our logistic supplies encountered virtually no difficulty. Corps 559 had worked out careful plans, there were in addition rice, ammunition, fuel captured from the enemy. The soldiers could eat their fill, the vehicles and guns had plenty of fuel, ammunition, the troops were encouraged and helped by the population along the roads; the speed of the march further increased.

On April 10, the eastern column reported that Lê Trọng Tấn and Lê Quang Hòa had arrived in Nha Trang; preparations were being made for our attack on Phan Rang.

351 km north of Sài Gòn, Phan Rang, Nguyễn Văn Thiệu's birthplace, was the most important town in Ninh Thuận. Phan Rang had Tân Thành Port, Ninh Chữ Port, and Thành Sơn Airfield with the strength of an air division. Highway 1 and a railway stretched across Phan Rang, linking Sài Gòn with the newly-liberated Central provinces.

Under arrangement of US Army Chief of Staff Wayen, the South Vietnamese forces moved their strategic reserves to set up a remote defence line in Phan Rang-Xuân Lộc- Tây Ninh. With more than ten thousand men organized in a defence line – on favorable terrain and with both naval and air support – the South Vietnamese nurtured the hope of resisting our main-force formations until the rainy season began; then the weather conditions would become difficult and we would be unable to organize major strikes against Sài Gòn and Nam Bộ for at least six more months.

On April 11, the South was reported to be sending reinforcements to Phan Rang. The General Chief of Staff's Office

sent a message to Tấn advising him to pay attention to the speed of our troops' march. If it was determined that our attack on Phan Rang would take a lot of time and not clearly benefit us, only a single force would remain to besiege Phan Rang while our other forces were to march quickly into eastern Nam Bộ, overcoming all difficulties with regard to logistic supplies and roads.

On April 13, Tấn sent a message reporting on developments with our combat plan for the eastern column, and the logistic supplies of our marching column. According to the plan, after the liberation of Phan Rang, we would occupy Bà Rịa and Vũng Tàu, cut off the Biên Hòa -Vũng Tàu highway, establish control over the Lòng Tàu River, and transport 130-mm caliber guns to Nhơn Trạch to shell Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield. Depending on the situation, if the enemy gathered in Biên Hòa, we might take a roundabout direction to the east and southeast of Sài Gòn, cross the river, and advance toward our main target.

On the morning of April 14, our troops opened fire on Phan Rang. Our attack was fierce. Deeply aware of the value of time, our troops assaulted various targets throughout the town. The South Vietnamese, backed by their air force and artillery, and relying on their defence system and an advantageous terrain, stubbornly resisted.

During the first two days, we managed to occupy only a small number of targets along the periphery of Phan Rang. On the morning of April 16, the Commander of Army Corps 2 led Division 325 into combat. Their combat plan involved sending in a strong force (transported in rubber-tyred vehicles and tanks) that would advance along Highway 1 to occupy Phan Rang, then move eastward to occupy Tân Thành and Ninh Chữ Harbors where they could close off the sea route. At the same time, our troops followed Highway 11 to the northwest, launched an attack on the enemy's western flank, occupied Thành Sơn Airfield, closed off all land routes, and, in coordination with local troops and the general population, encircled and completely wiped out or dissolved the enemy.

Our results were tremendous. We smashed the enemy's line of defence in Phan Rang, wiped out the frontline Command of

the South's Military Zone Ill, the Command of Air Division 6, the Command of Infantry Division 2, the Paratroopers' Brigade 2, Commando Intergroup 31, a regiment, and the entire forces of Ninh Thuận Subsector. We also established control over Tân Thành and Ninh Chữ Harbors, occupied Thành Sơn Airfield, and captured nearly 40 intact planes. Military leaders and thousands of officers and men were taken prisoner, including among them Major General Nguyễn Vĩnh Nghi and Air Brigadier General Phạm Ngọc Sang. Our troops completely liberated Phan Rang and Ninh Thuận province.

Upon hearing reports of victory, the Central Military Committee sent a message of greeting to all cadres and soldiers, Party members and youth union members of Army Corps 2, Military Zone V, and the people in the newly liberated areas, calling on them to continue marching forward until our historic campaign had resulted in complete victory. The High Command issued a directive to transfer Nguyễn Vĩnh Nghi and Phạm Ngọc Sang immediately to Hà Nội by air.

News of victory flowed in from the various fronts. Army Corps 2 units occupied Tuy Phong district center; captured enemy warships; downed enemy planes; wiped out enemy infantry men; liberated lands along their advance, including the district centers of Phan Rí, Hòa Đa and Sông Mao. The infantry and tanks of the Army Corps, advancing in several prongs, assaulted the center of the town of Phan Thiết, occupied the command post in Bình Thuận subsector, and liberated the Hàm Tân district center.

On the morning of April 20, the first units of the eastern column, which included Division 325 with their weapons and technical materials, arrived in Rừng Lá, near Xuân Lộc. Tấn and Hòa arrived immediately afterwards and quickly established contact with the Command of the Sài Gòn Front. In his capacity as Deputy Commander of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign, Tấn decided to strengthen Army Corps 4 with Regiment 95B (Division 32) and the various supplies and provisions recovered after our attack on Xuân Lộc.

The rapid advance of the eastern column across nearly 1,000 km – with over 32,000 men and 2,276 vehicles, heavy guns, tanks and

armored vehicles – represented a strategically creative and timely blow. It came as a great surprise to the enemy, shattering their design to effect a large regroupment in the coastal region. The column fought from the north along Highway 1 all the way to the eastern and northeastern approaches to Sài Gòn, opened a new road for transporting strategic logistic supplies, and helped shift the balance of forces on the battlefield in our favor. The column helped open strategically advantageous positions for the offensive to liberate Sài Gòn-Gia Định.

In light of the enemy's stubborn resistance in Xuân Lộc, the Party Committee and the Regional Command directed Army Corps 4 to draw from their experience. Trần Văn Trà personally directed the combat operations. Proceeding from the assessment that Xuân Lộc could put up a stubborn resistance only when linked to Biên Hòa, the Regional Command decided to change our military strategy: we shifted from direct attacks on the town to attacks on newly arrived enemy reinforcements which had not yet managed to gain a steady foothold along the periphery. We strove to isolate Xuân Lộc from Biên Hòa, cut off Highway 2 from Xuân Lộc to Bà Rịa, and intercept South Vietnamese forces coming from Biên Hòa and Trảng Bom to attempt counterattacks.

Army Corps 4, which had just been strengthened with infantry men and heavy guns, attacked and wiped out South Việt Nam's combat column 52 and an armored vehicle group, occupied Dầu Giây crossroads, and cut off Highway 1 from Xuân Lộc to Bàu Cá. They also established control over the last section of Highway 20 from Túc Trưng to Dầu Giấy, occupied Núi Thị, Túc Trưng and Kiệm Tân, and wiped out enemy troops counterattacking from Trảng Bom. Combat columns 43 and 48 of South Việt Nam's Divison 18, along with Armored Brigade 3, suffered heavy losses. Local troops and guerillas wiped out or compelled the withdrawal of a number of enemy posts on various communication axes and in the vicinity of the provincial town.

South Vietnamese forces were unable to reoccupy Dầu Giấy Crossroads, had suffered heavy losses, were threatened with encirclement and annihilation, and were facing a powerful column

of our troops which had recently arrived from the east. Consequently, they were forced to pullout of Xuân Lộc on April 20.

The Xuân Lộc victory shook the entire system of enemy defences around Sài Gòn, and caused further demoralization in the South Vietnamese army.

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Reports of victory filled all of our people with enthusiasm.

The great rear area effected a general mobilization of human and material resources to support the great front. Virtually, all transport forces in the North were mobilized in the largest-ever support campaign. Phan Trọng Tuệ, Minister of Communications and Transport and Vice-chairman of the Council of Support for the South, mobilized tens of thousands of lorries, hundreds of railway wagons, over 30 sea-faring ships, and hundreds of sorties of cargo planes to bring cadres, fighters, technological personnel, along with hundreds of thousands of tons of weapons and equipment, to the battlefield.

From Hà Nội and Nam Định, railway convoys full of troops, weapons and ammunition headed for Vinh. From here, men and weapons were lorried and shipped to eastern Nam Bộ.

River and sea ports in the North were fully active. Our ships continuously carried tanks, heavy guns and soldiers to Đà Nẵng, where they proceeded to move by land along Highway 1 to the place of regroupment of the regional logistic service in Dầu Giây.

Cargo planes and helicopters were also mobilized for the transport of troops and ammunition to the main battlefield.

At Army Headquarters, Hoàng Văn Thái, First Deputy Chief of the General Staff, followed our forces onto the battlefield. He controlled each ammunition, fuel and foodstuff storehouse, and closely guided the organization of the march and its logistic supplies.

On the various roads to the South, Đồng Sĩ Nguyễn and Hoàng Minh Thảo were busy day and night catering to the supply of sufficient quantities of ammunition, fuel, food and medicines for the marching column. Phùng Thế Tài, Deputy Chief of Staff, was constantly positioned atop the passes in Tây Nguyên, exhorting our troops to arrive quickly and fully intact.

From January to April 1975, the Trường Sơn Transport Group carried to Nam Bộ 115,000 men and 90,000 tons of cargo (including 37,000 tons of weapons and 9,000 tons of fuel). From April 5 to 26 alone, during the days of "sprint preparations", we sent to the battlefields 10,100 tons of ammunition, 2,300 tons of food, foodstuffs and medicines, and 2,600 tons of fuel. Many vehicle, gun and tank repair stations were set up along the way to improve and sustain the mobility of our campaign.

In Zone V, the Party Committee and the Command of the Military Zone, under the leadership of Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân, although busy with taking over provinces and cities and stabilizing the lives of millions of people in the newly liberated areas, attach great importance to the transport of supplies for the frontline. Under the personal command of Võ Thứ, Deputy Commander of the Military Zone, a convoy of over one hundred lorries carried 130-mm caliber shells to B2 without making a single stop.

To ensure logistic supplies quickly, given the conditions prevailing at that time, was not an easy matter. The roads were in a state of disrepair, bridges had been destroyed or damaged, the enemy tried by its every means to check us by land and by sea, and the weather conditions were harsh as the rainy season had just begun. All hardships must be overcome with the strength of a war waged by the whole people, of gallantry and creative intelligence. People in the newly liberated area extended their all-out support. A document with the Military Management Committee's signature and red seal was enough to enable the mobilization of hundreds of lorries to carry troops, weapons and ammunition to the frontline.

In their march, some units which were not aware of the food situation reported to the High Command that our troops were short of rice. Concerned that this would slow the pace of our march, the

Standing Board of the Central Military Committee devoted nearly one full day to finding a solution. After consulting various sources, Hoàng Văn Thái reported that there was in fact no shortage of rice, that storehouses had been arranged along the way. He immediately sent a message to the marching column explaining that in Cam Ranh there were already two to three thousand tons of rice, and that fuel was available in Quy Nhơn, Nha Trang and Cam Ranh.

In the last stage of the war, the effect of on-the-spot logistic supplies became apparent. In the South, with the assistance of Đinh Đức Thiện, the regional logistic services under Bùi Phùng's direction mobilized all forces for the transport of weapons to campaign stations and storehouses. Concentrated efforts were made to repair vehicles, open roads, and construct bridges. Highway 14 from Đồng Xoài to Cây Gáo and Bến Bầu was re-built. Logistics troops consolidated and expanded campaign roads in various directions with a total length exceeding 3,000 km. During the later half of April in particular, our regional logistics services dispatched from rear areas 10,000 cadres and fighters to set up eight mobile battalions, mobilized around 4,000 lorries, over 600 motor boats, thousands of "cargo bicycles" and over 60,000 laborers, and established 15 field hospitals and 17 medical care teams (with a total of 10,000 beds) to serve our troops in their attacks on Sài Gòn-Gia Định.

At the time, the transport of ammunition and fuel to the very threshold of Sài Gòn was still a big problem. On April 20, the Central Military Committee sent an urgent message to the Command of Corps 559: "Give priority to the transport of 130-mm, 100-mm caliber shells, D74, DKZ 75 and DKZ 82, 120-mm caliber, 85-mm caliber, and 122-mm caliber shells. Give priority, also, to the transport of fuel, particularly diesel fuel and auxiliary lubricants. Arrive in Đồng Xoài on April 29 at the latest."

The order was conveyed immediately to each storehouse and military station. Large quantities of ammunition and fuel were urgently delivered to the battlefield.

Our final battle was thus ensured with all necesssary technical supplies.

*Chapter VIII*

# THE LIBERATION OF THE TRƯỜNG SA ARCHIPELAGO

In those days, something special took shape outside the purview of our initial strategic plan. This was the guidance of the Politburo, Central Military Committee and Army High Command over the liberation of the islands in the Trường Sa Archipelago. Occupied at that time by the South's army, these islands were located in Vietnamese territorial waters and considered critically important both economically and militarily.

Right after our Buôn Ma Thuột victory, the Central Military Committee recommended to the Politburo that while preparing for the war's final strategic battle, we should liberate the islands and archipelagos currently held by the Southern army. This recommendation was included in the Politburo's Resolution of March 25, 1975.

The Military Committee appointed Hoàng Trà, Political Commissar of the Navy, to work with the General Chief-of- Staff's Office to assist in tracking enemy activity on the sea and recommend strategies and operations for our Navy in the final battle. I also requested that the General Chief-of-Staff's Office and the Foreign Ministry supply documents on the islands, archipelagos and territorial waters of Việt Nam. At the same time, I directed our Military Intelligence Department to improve its level of information on the South's position in the Eastern Sea.

On military and naval maps of Việt Nam, the Eastern Sea is a maritime area 2,000 to 4,000 meters deep in which there are two important archipelagos: Hoàng Sa in the north and Trường Sa in the south.

Since the 17th century, the Vietnamese feudal states had exercised sovereignty over these two archipelagos without contestation by any country. On the *Đại Nam nhất thống toàn đồ* (Complete Map of the United Đại Nam) drawn under the Nguyễn dynasty, these two archipelagos were together named Đại Trường Sa. After 1838 the official name of Việt Nam was changed to Đại Nam. The two archipelagos were drawn as a strip of land parallel to the coast of Central Việt Nam at the level of Quảng Nam province in the north and Khánh Hòa province in the south; they were given the names "Hoàng Sa" and "Vạn Lý Trường Sa".

Beginning in 1920, the French administration in Indochina asserted sovereignty over Hoàng Sa and Trường Sa, and organized State management over both archipelagos.

After World War II, a sovereignty dispute arose over this territory. In April 1946, French troops took control of the western group of the Hoàng Sa Archipelago. In November 1946, Chiang Kai-shek's troops landed on Phú Lâm island, part of the Hoàng Sa Archipelago, and in December of that year they landed on Itu Aba, part of the Trường Sa Archipelago. In 1950, Chiang Kai-shek's troops withdrew from both archipelagos. But in 1951, the People's Republic of China issued a statement proclaiming Chinese sovereignty of them. In 1956, a dispute arose between China and South Việt Nam. In 1961, the Sài Gòn Administration annexed the Trường Sa Archipelago, transforming it into Phước Hải commune, Đất Đỏ district, and Phước Tuy province.

While undergoing medical treatment in the Soviet Union, a message arrived for me from Hà Nội. I was informed that on January 19 and 20,1974, China had employed scores of naval vessels and a flight of fighter aircraft to attack the western group of the Hoàng Sa (Paracels) Archipelago (also named Nguyệt Thiềm). The Southern troops that had garrisoned these islands were subsequently taken prisoner by the Chinese.

It will be recalled that in the early 1960s, during the founding of the Trường Sơn Transport Corps (559), and when the 15th Central Committee Resolution asserted that the Revolution in the South must march forward along a path of bloody conflict, the Central Military Committee organized a special detachment to

support the South by sea routes. Prior to 1964, we used small vessels starting from Đồ Sơn and sailing southward along the coast. From 1965 onwards, we opened a transport lane in international waters via Hainan, Leizhou, and eastern Hoàng Sa to Song Tử Tây, then via Na Tu Na to Cà Mau. We used islands in the Trường Sa Archipelago as a stopover on the "maritime Hồ Chí Minh Trail", relying on natural obstacles, namely underwater coral shoals.

Despite hardship and difficulty encountered, our transports of technical supplies to the front were satisfactory. In total, 169 shipments were sent out; 100 reached their destinations, 50 had to be returned, 19 were lost. 5,677 tons of cargo were successfully transported, while around 700 tons were lost. We suffered 76 casualties and 51 wounded during these efforts.

As in the case of the Trường Sơn Corps, sea transport for our troops fighting in the South received special encouragement from President Hồ Chí Minh.

On January 20,1974, China attacked the South's army in an attempt to occupy the northern Hoàng Sa Archipelago, clearly demonstrating the strategic importance of these far-off territories wavering in the Eastern Sea. Renowned for its military acumen, the Supreme Command clearly deciphered the problem. These territories must be liberated immediately. Any delay that enables another country to occupy them will create complex problems for us to overcome. Our biggest challenge was the need to occupy the islands with the small naval forces we had at that time. On the Eastern Sea front, our actions must also be characterized by "swiftness, boldness, secrecy, and the certitude of victory".

On April 2, at Army Headquarters, after receiving a report on the Đà Nẵng battle, I issued a directive to Lê Trọng Tấn. Besides conveying the orders to Military Zone V and the Naval Command, I told him, *you should organize an attack to liberate the islands, with your primary objective being the Trường Sa (Spratley) Archipelago.* Warships from the 7th Fleet, and even those from other countries, may be operating in this area. South Việt Nam's navy has been endowed with large craft. Therefore, combat art must be resolute, rash, very clever, creative and endowed with secrecy. Our various units must be prepared to fight whenever

the opportunity presents itself, and be certain of attaining victory. Our attack must be launched at precisely the right moment. If there are signs of enemy withdrawal, we must commence our attacks at once. If the Southern troops are facing a critical situation, especially in Sài Gòn, the High Command will provide us with the information necessary to launch effective attacks. If foreign troops manage to occupy these islands, we must resolutely retake them. Finally, if any difficulties arise, you will request instructions from the High Command.

I also directed the General Chief of Staff's Office to dispatch the Vanguard Command of the Navy immediately to Đà Nẵng, where it would seize the South's naval base and prepare for a battle on the sea.

Prior to this, on March 30, the Central Military Committee sent this message to Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân:

"Under instructions of the Politburo, the Standing Board entrusts the Regional Committee and the Command of B1[1] with the task of studying and carrying out, when the most favorable opportunity emerges, the occupation of the Nam Sa[2] Archipelago. Nguyễn Bá Phát, envoy of the General Chief-of-Staff's Office, along with accompanying naval cadres, will be guided by the Regional Committee and the Regional Military Committee in the implementation of this plan."

This was a critical task because the Trường Sa Archipelago belonged to Việt Nam. Explorative work showed that vast oil reserves exist here.

On the afternoon of April 4, the Central Military Committee sent another message to Military Zone V:

"Carry out the occupation of the islands in the Eastern Sea, focusing especially on the Nam Sa islands. Only the most trusted and highest ranking cadres are to be informed."

1. Military Zone V.
2. China and the Sài Gòn Administration gave Trường Sa the name of Nam Sa.

The order was immediately carried out. Military Zone V and the Naval Command detailed our combat plans. Forces from Military Zone V, a fleet of naval craft, and a landing force of the Navy were organized. The commander of the forces was Mai Năng. Group 125 transport cargos had just arrived from Hải Phòng to take control over Đà Nẵng. These unnamed ships had frequently embarked across "the Hồ Chí Minh Trail of the sea". As they had often traveled through the Trường Sa Archipelago, they could easily distinguish between various islands and avoid underwater hazards. Team No 1 of Special Commando Group 126 possessed strong records of launching secret, surprise attacks and sinking enemy vessels on the Cửa Việt battleground.

On April 9, the Military Intelligence Department detected signs of South Vietnamese withdrawal from the islands in the Eastern Sea. The Central Military Committee sent Võ Chí Công and Chu Huy Mân a highest-priority message, which was simultaneously addressed to Hoàng Hữu Thái, Deputy Naval Commander in Đà Nẵng.

"The puppet troops are reportedly preparing to pull out of the Nam Sa islands. Verify this immediately and instruct our forces to take swift action in accordance with our military plans. Any delays may result in an armed, foreign occupation as several foreign countries intend to occupy the islands at the first opportunity."

On April 13, Military Zone V submitted to the General Chief-of-Staff's Office a report of its plan to occupy the islands. I immediately wrote the following and sent it to Mân:

"My views on your arrangements to implement the Central Military Committee's decision to occupy the islands are:

"1. *We must avail ourselves of the first opportunity to occupy the islands.* If we fail to take advantage of specific opportunities to occupy them, foreign countries are likely to arrive and do so. If we advance on the islands before the South pulls out, our situation may grow more complicated; we possess limited forces and there are difficulties in sending reinforcements.

"2. Consequently, the specific timing for our attack will be as follows:

"a. If the enemy has withdrawn a major part of his forces or completely, we are to advance at once. If foreign troops arrive before us, retake the islands.

"b. If the enemy shows indications of withdrawing or begins to withdraw, follow this development. When the enemy has withdrawn a major part of its forces, act swiftly to occupy the islands.

"c. When the enemy encounters great hardship, especially in their important bases, attack and occupy the islands immediately.

"The two specific opportunities above are left to you to follow and take a decision. You will be notified of a third specific opportunity as soon as it emerges."

Such were our opportunities to occupy these islands, but what remained for us to solve was how to occupy them when our weapons and vehicles were quantitatively and qualitatively inferior to those of our more modernized enemy.

I recalled, 20 years earlier, the 15th anniversary of the founding of the Việt Nam People's Navy. While speaking about the battles we had fought on the rivers and sea, I pointed out that our fight against the enemy along the coast, in off-shore waters, and in various Vietnamese archipelagos, needed to be given our utmost attention. I advised our cadres and fighters to dedicate themselves to the formidable task of defeating in naval combat the enemy's massive, sizable forces with our smaller, less substantial ones. Commending the unnamed ships and our "special water commando" units, I learnt that the combat art of our Navy was to know how to defeat the enemy even when our troops were smaller in quantity and possessed less modern equipment. For this purpose, it was necessary to show *dynamism, initiative, resolve, flexibility, cleverness, creativity, and secrecy.*

On the following day, a report indicated that the South's army was preparing to withdraw from the Trường Sa Archipelago. After confirming this report, I sent another message to Military Zone V.

"*The opportunity to attack the islands in the Nam Sa area is now upon us.* Only the islands occupied by Southern troops are to be attacked. Issue immediate orders to this effect. Follow the situation closely and report regularly to the High Command."

After receiving directives from the Military Committee and the High Command, Hoàng Hữu Thái ordered our naval vessels to disguise themselves as fishing boats and leave the harbor before dawn.

With modest means and though few in number, facing huge enemy warships and an immense ocean, our troops devised a unique strategy: to approach stealthily, land quickly, and occupy our targets by surprise. At 4:30 a.m. on April 14 – more than one hour after landing – we opened fire, quickly killed or captured all of the South's troops, liberated Song Tử Tây island and flew our National Flag there. Then, on April 25, our troops occupied Sơn Ca island. On April 27, we liberated Nam Yết and Sinh Tồn islands. On April 28, our troops liberated Trường Sa and An Bang islands, completing the task that had been entrusted to them only half a month before.

On the same day, April 28, our troops on the islands and the naval crafts around them received a commendatory letter. "The Central Military Committee is elated to learn that our troops have occupied the Trường Sa islands. We warmly commend and congratulate those units which have completed this task of paramount significance."

The effectiveness of our offensives and uprisings on the main battlefield, along with the tireless support from our rear area, contributed to the remarkable improvements in the spirit and strength of our army and people. The enemy's line of defence from afar was broken. Vast territorial waters rich in natural resources, with important, strategically located islands and archipelagos, had been restored to then sovereignty of the Motherland.

Numerous columns of combat-strengthened troops were now ready to attack the enemy's last sanctuary.

*Chapter IX*

# THE HỒ CHÍ MINH CAMPAIGN

Our opportunity for total victory had arrived.

At Army Headquarters, our map of the South rapidly became old with the quick military developments. The staff officers put in its place a 1/200,000 scale map of Nam Bộ with numerous blue and red signs indicating the latest situation between ourselves and the enemy on the main battlefield, and a 1/50,000 scale map of Sài Gòn-Gia Định.

Having continuously led our combat for several months since the Tây Nguyên Campaign, I had come to know, virtually by heart, the terrain that separated us from our enemy. Spread before my eyes all day and night, the maps of Nam Bộ and Sài Gòn -Gia Định elicited reflections from me on fighting strategies in our final, decisive battle.

Walking around the bureau, looking at the map from all directions, I remembered an earlier time when I stood before a relief map of Điện Biên Phủ and pondered over the most effective way to fight the retrenched camp. These were two historic events, spanning more than 20 years, but similar in the high extent of brain storming in the final strategic battle, helping us to determine the best combat approach for winning the biggest victory while suffering minimum losses.

It has become a habit of mine that, each time I face difficult and important problems in leadership, I consult many cadres, especially those possessing much experience in advisory work and war-tested command. Democracy in our military meetings has always engendered valuable suggestions and ideas. At that moment, Hoàng Văn Thái, First Deputy General Chief of Staff in

charge of combat operations and logistics problems, had to devote most of his time to the mobilization and organization of battlefield support. Moreover, the war situation was developing very quickly. I decided to establish a standing team to help me direct combat operations. Four times a day, after our briefings, I received the team's reports and suggestions. Cao Văn Khánh, Deputy General Chief of Staff, was a member of this team. A patriotic intellectual who joined the revolution as early as August 1945, Khánh was also a militarist who commanded Brigade 308 in important battles during the anti-French Resistance. He was Commander of the B70 Front (Trị-Thiên) during our resistance against the US. An eager, loyal man with significant experience commanding combat in coordinated formations, he enjoyed the confidence and affection of all our army personnel.

After the Central Military Committee and Army High Command reported that it would concentrate on our strategic needs for the final battle, I requested all members of the standing team to study and report their views on the combat plan for the campaign for to liberate Sài Gòn-Gia Định. They were to keep in mind both the likelihood of quick, final developments and a prolongation of the conflict until the end of the rainy season.

I made a number of suggestions for the team to consider, such as the eventuality of our encircling the enemy and tactically dividing it into disconnected units; the possibility of wiping out the enemy on the periphery of Sài Gòn and not allowing it to regroup within the city. Where would the key battle be fought? From what direction(s) would our forces penetrate the city? What steps would have to be taken to control the Lòng Tàu River, Chợ Gạo Channel, and the Biên Hòa and Tân Sơn Nhất Airfields; to use enemy planes to strike at targets in the city; and to check the enemy's flight to the sea.

The meeting room of the standing team was located on Headquarter premises. I regularly chaired the discussions and noted down useful ideas.

Statements given by Nguyễn Vĩnh Nghi provided us with important information. After his capture on April 16 at Phan Rang, this major general was transferred at once to the North. Before the

lenient, humane treatment given by the revolutionary soldiers, he revealed that South Vietnamese defence forces had been spread thin, and that very few reserve forces remained. Inside the city, the enemy could rely only on the police and civil guards. By his estimation, the most dangerous direction of attack would be from Gò Dầu Hạ-Trảng Bàng. Toward the east, Southern forces could destroy bridges to delay the advance of our troops. Their main ammunition dumps were Nhà Bè and Cát Lái. Long Bình served only as a fuel supply storehouse. As the enemy relied mainly on its air force, Tân Sơn Nhất, Biên Hòa and Cần Thơ Airfields played an important role militarily – particularly Biên Hòa Airfield, which was a hangar area for F5 and A37 fighter aircraft.

When questioned about his defeat in Phan Rang, Nghi put the blame on his troops, who were demoralized and unwilling to fight. As if still clinging to hope, he said, 'We lack supplies and time. If you had delayed your attack for one month, who knows what the situation would have been like!"

At the Camp David in Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield, members of the military delegation of the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam and the Republic of South Việt Nam also provided us with noteworthy information. The enemy's stubborn and arrogant attitude gradually lessened, in direct proportion to the pace and effectiveness of our army's attacks and people's uprisings. There were no longer rude words or power outtages or instances of running water being cut off. Instead, the Southern side softened its tone at the conference table, seemed more reasonable in its personal relations, tried to understand our attitude, and even went so far as to hint about engaging in talks in the attempt to avoid a major offensive against Sài Gòn and to rescue its administration from collapse. All of this could be regarded as a kind of political-military barometer – and right inside enemy ranks.

On April 16, after receiving a summary report of discussions, I put forth a series of questions: Which would be the most advantageous direction of attack? Which was most likely to catch the South Vietnamese forces by surprise? How could we tightly encircle and annihilate the enemy's peripheral divisions? How could we quickly organize a deep military thrust into the city? In

our upcoming battle, was the enemy likely to disintegrate as in Tây Nguyên and Đà Nẵng? How would the enemy react when he detected our forces around Sài Gòn, especially in the east? If the Biên Hòa base and Tân Sơn Nhất Airfields were brought under control by our artillery, could the enemy air force possibly react against us? If the Americans gave up their intervention into Việt Nam or replaced Thiệu, how would we seize our opportunities and win total victory? If victory could not be achieved in April, how would we continue to fight and pressure the South during the rainy season?

The standing team finalized our combat plan for implementation the following day.

The team reached the following conclusion regarding the enemy's disposition in each direction: The enemy had strong forces toward the east and west-northwest. To the west and southwest, the enemy defences were weaker. The enemy was deploying forces to the periphery to defend against us; consequently, he was comparatively very weak inside the city. With regard to Sài Gòn-Gia Định in particular, our overall strategy was strong, our main forces attacked from outside the city while our local populations rose up from within, and it was becoming increasingly difficult for the enemy to cope. If we inflicted heavy losses in the enemy's external line, sudden changes could occur within Sài Gòn.

The standing team proposed that we attack mainly from the northwest. The east would be an important direction, while a deep thrust could be launched from the southeast. The south was another important direction which we must use to our full advantage. In terms of our combat approach, it was necessary to encircle the South's peripheral groups of defence, then cut them off and destroy them. We would combine strong attacks from the outside with combative sabotage activities and uprisings from the inside; prevent the enemy from regrouping inside the city; occupy our main military, political and economic targets; and firmly secure control of the overall situation.

To carry out the above, our various columns must be assembled in their regroupment positions at an early date, between April 20 and 30, and toward our main directions of

attack. Our eastern column must quickly occupy Bà Rịa, march on Vũng Tàu and Nhơn Trạch, and position guns in Nhơn Trạch from where we will shell Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield. Army Corps 4 will intercept the enemy in Xuân Lộc. Regiment 232 will cut off Highway 4 in accordance with our plan. In all directions, our troops must quickly approach and shell their military targets. In the direction of Zone IX, it will be necessary to impose our control over Trà Nóc (Cần Thơ) Airfield and prevent the enemy from using it to assist Sài Gòn. Special commando troops must occupy all bridges leading into the city and create appropriate conditions that will enable our forces to penetrate deeply.

The standing team also prepared a combat plan for the rainy season. In this scenario, our troops must be exhorted to maintain their resolve, engage in continuous fighting, and create conditions necessary for us to win victory in the upcoming dry season. It was necessary to send reinforcement and replacement forces, and prepare combat plans for the rainy season in our troop approaches to Sài Gòn and western Nam Bộ. We would have to intensify our attacks and uprisings in the Mekong Delta in close coordination with the Sài Gòn Front.

Khánh concluded his report. I agreed in the main with the results of the standing team's study, and gave instructions on a few points.

1. The situation was developing rapidly. The enemy was in a hopeless, declining state and threatened with collapse. This situation, however, might change. All sudden changes must be forecasted. It was necessary that we encircle the enemy, divide it into separate sections, assemble strong forces to strike at the enemy decisively, obliterate the enemy's peripheral lines, prevent them from regrouping in Sài Gòn, and organize effective military formations to occupy important targets within the city.

2. We had to pay attention to activities among enemy troops. Prisoners of war and rallied soldiers from the South were to be interrogated for information about recent developments. Additional information would be procured on the political and social situation in Sài Gòn and the Mekong Delta.

3. The Politburo policy on general offensives and insurrections, and on combining offensives with insurrections, had to be widely comprehended. We would also have to accurately forecast the strength of the mass uprising, the extent of the people's participation in the fighting, and the movement of our troops.

4. We had no choice but to strive for total victory before the arrival of the first rains. At the same time, we would make additional calculations on the use of forces and supplies for our strategies and campaigns if the war ended up being prolonged. In any eventuality, victory would have to be secured.

5. In any event, those were our initial studies. It was necessary to consider these problems further. One weakness we faced was a lack of an overall sense of the latest battlefield developments. Therefore, our standing team's views were just for consultation. It was up to local battle commanders to make decisions. The General Chief of Staff's Office was to send cadres at once to gather information from those on the battlefield.

Our working session ended with everyone feeling as though our work had only just begun. All our thoughts were focused on a single objective: To strike the enemy at its source, a populated area fortified by inner and peripheral defences. What actions were we to take to win the quickest victory, to prevent the enemy from regrouping its forces, to spare our troops' blood, and to avoid civilian casualties? Our staff brainstormed and discussed ideas at length to find a solution.

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Following the Politburo's meeting on March 31, 1975, the Party quickly undertook practical action from our frontline to our rear areas.

The Politburo and Central Military Committee concentrated on their leadership over the main front. Their first challenge was to ensure that our forces from the North arrived on the battlefield quickly, in full numbers and in best of condition. A frontline support campaign had started.

Groups of general staff and logistic supply cadres received orders to leave at once for Trường Sơn Road to accelerate our troops' march and follow the transport of large artillery and tank shells, and ensure that overall support for B2 was more efficient. Our strategic opportunity could not slip away due to slowness in the dispatch of forces.

Messages flowed in and out successively.

Our prior questions remained virtually unchanged, revolving around the march of our troops: Where was the column marching along the coast? When would Army Corps 1 reach its destination? Where were Divisions 341 and 316 and those of Tây Nguyên camped? When would the convoy transporting ammunition reach its destination? Answers to these questions seemed to be different every day and every hour. The red arrows on our map were quickly moved southwards.

The Politburo and Central Military Committee were very happy at the news that a large army of Sài Gòn populations were being mobilized. The Sài Gòn – Gia Định municipal committee had set up volunteer propaganda teams to spread tens of thousands of leaflets. Our contacts in the city were preparing hundreds of motor vehicles, loudspeakers, flags and banners. Nguyễn Văn Linh and Võ Văn Kiệt personally organized the mass uprisings. The leaders of the Party and the revolutionary power had come to the suburbs. Many municipal committee members and cadres of the same rank had entered the capital city. Tens of thousands of people were expected to take to the street when necessary. The Sài Gòn – Gia Định armed forces, with regiments Gia Định 1, Gia Định 2, and the special commando units, were strengthened by several regiments and a brigade of combat-tested special commandos of the Campaign Command.

A group of cadres from the General Chief of Staff's Office and of various general departments, entrusted with the duty to assist the campaign Command in various respects – the organization of command, political work, logistics work, technical work – had arrived on the battlefield. They sent a message informing the center that they were undertaking the assigned work. I urged them to comprehend fully the importance of our large-scale campaign,

which involved four or five army corps equipped with technical weapons. This corps would attack the enemy from outside Sài Gòn in combination with mass uprisings from the inner city, and would therefore require coordination over a very broad area. New problems arose requiring quick, effective solutions. Our opportunity was not to be lost, and our biggest victory must be won from a strategic, campaign-oriented angle. The Party's policy, as well as the way Việt Nam conducted a war, must be firmly grasped and applied to specific situations and tasks, from the transport of troops, weapons and equipment to the complicated terrain of plain areas. Our artillery must provide effective support without causing losses to the population. Furthermore, we would have to take over a city populated by several million inhabitants, then manage and re-educate millions of prisoners of war and former South Vietnamese civil servants.

I shook hands with each comrade: Nam Long[1], Doãn Tuế[2], Nguyễn Chí Điềm[3], Lê Xuân Kiện[4], Hoàng Niệm[5], and Phan Khắc Hy[6]. As vanguard commanders possessing significant combat experience, they eagerly set out promising to fulfill their duties.

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Attended by all members of the Party Committee and Command of the Sài Gòn - Gia Định Front, B2 received more cadres from Group A75 and the Army High Command based on the staff, political, logistic supply bodies. The Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign quickly took shape.

The opportunity was favorable to us in many respects, allowing us to undertake the general attack on Sài Gòn. However, as our main-force units had not all arrived at the battlefield, the

1. Former fighter of the Propaganda Group for the Liberation Army, now Deputy Director of the Military Institute.
2. The artillery commander .
3. Commander of the Special Commando Unit.
4. Deputy Commander of the Armored Vehicle Formation.
5. Deputy Commander of the Signal Corps.
6. Deputy Head of Corps 559.

Politburo sent a message directing the Campaign Command to delay preparations for a few more days, pending the arrival of the entire army corps so as to achieve absolute superiority over the enemy and ensure our victory. The message, signed by the First Secretary, read in part:

"I have met with Võ Nguyên Giáp and noted that more days of preparation are needed. When the majority of the forces of Army Corps 3 and 1 (infantry, weapons and technical equipment) arrive, we will launch our great offensive. It is not advisable to start now.

"Nevertheless, the Campaign will open, at the latest, in the last part of April 1975. Until then, it is necessary to intensify various column activities, especially in the west and southwest, cut off Highway 4, encircle the enemy and divide him into many separate sections (sowing disarray in his ranks), and create those conditions that will best prepare us for our final, decisive battle."

The report of the General Chief of Staff's Office disclosed that our comrades on the battlefield agreed with the standing team's combat plan to liberate Sài Gòn. At this decisive moment in the war, the agreement between the frontline and the rear on the application of the Vietnamese way to conduct war further increased our confidence in victory. Accordingly, a message sent by the Politburo pointed out:

"Our plan for an all-out offensive must ensure that once started, the offensive will be carried until total victory. The offensive will start on the periphery of the city, followed by other available forces thrusting deeply into the center of Sài Gòn from various directions. Our attacks must be launched both from the inside and from the outside of the city, enabling our compatriots to rise up. In the present situation, remarkable speed, courage, and secrecy lie in this. It is necessary that we anticipate situations in which combat will be protracted, and consequently prepare for such eventualities."

Complying with Politburo directives, the Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign finalized our combat plan on the basis of a previous plan that had been approved by the Central Board. The spirit was to avoid unnecessary changes. Our B2 forces, which were familiar with the battlefield, took charge of areas further away that

possessed complex terrain, leaving nearer areas in the north and east to forces traveling longer distances. At the same time, an order was issued to the units of Military Zones VIII and IX, the commando and special commando units in the suburban areas and inside the city, to launch continuous attacks, approach the city of Cần Thơ and its main arteries, focusing on Highway 4 where it extended from Sài Gòn to the Mekong Delta. The troops and people of Nam Bộ, whose attack employed the overall efficacy of the "three thrusts" (military, political and propaganda among enemy troops), liberated a number of important areas. They succeeded, too, in linking the "enclaves" of Long An, Gò Công, Bến Tre, and Mỹ Tho, while opening corridors from eastern to western Nam Bộ and establishing control over important roads. Simultaneously carrying out strength building and combat activities, a number of provinces and districts managed to set up additional local battalions and companies; many communes already had guerilla teams. Toward the southwest of Sài Gòn in particular, which was an open, marshy area, these troops and people had to overcome countless difficulties to open the Tây Ninh -Kiến Tường corridor, establish control over part of the Vàm Cỏ Tây River, establish a liberated area, set up reserves of food and ammunition, and create favorable conditions for a division of Regiment 232 to attack Sài Gòn. To the southwest, the High Command decided to attack Thủ Thừa township and the provincial town of Tân An rather than attacking Mộc Hóa as initially planned. The attack was unsuccessful because the enemy had prepared a solid defence. Our troops shifted their attack to the system of posts north of Highway 4, inflicting heavy enemy casualties. To the northwest, Division 25, which had been subjected to strong attacks, was compelled to separate from one another in an attempt to cope with the situation; as a result, it could not be used in the defence of the suburban area.

Our local combat disposition was in place.

On April 22, our attack plan against Sài Gòn - Gia Định was finally approved by the Party Committee and the Command of the Hồ Chí Minh campaign.

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The Xuân Lộc defence line had collapsed. The last hope of the South Vietnamese army and administration was now extinguished.

By US "suggestion", Nguyễn Văn Thiệu resigned from his post as President of the Republic. The United States hoped to "change the horse" it rode in South Việt Nam, forcing a different guise upon it in an attempt to delay our attack on Sài Gòn. At noon on April 22, Sài Gòn Radio broadcasted Thiệu's sad, bitter tirade as he blamed his American "boss" for letting him down: .

"The Americans demanded that we achieve the impossible. Therefore, I told them: You are asking us to do what you failed to do over the last six years with half a million elite troops and talented officers and an expenditure of nearly US$300 billion. If I do not suggest that you have been defeated by the Vietnamese communists, I must humbly suggest that you cannot win. You have tried to withdraw in honor. Now our troops lack weapons, ammunition, helicopters, and B52s. And you are asking us to do something impossible, like filling up an ocean with stones, in the same manner as if you were giving me only three dollars while urging me to travel by first-class air ticket, to rent a hotel room for 30 dollars per day, to eat three or four pieces of steak and drink seven or eight glasses of wine every day. That is extraordinary enough!".

The eating and drinking habits of South Việt Nam's president were mixed in his language, even in his final statement.

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During the final two weeks of April 1975, the major forces of our army successively took up their positions.

In the north, Army Corps 1 had established itself in the area south of Sông Bé.

In the northwest, Army Corps 3 had advanced to Dầu Tiếng.

In the west, Regiment 232 had nearly reached the Vàm Cỏ Đông River and Hậu Nghĩa.

In the south, Regiments 88 and 24, which were backed by Regiment 271B, were stationed in Cần Giuộc. Divisions 5 and 8 had approached Highway 4 from Tân An to Cai Lậy, threatening Mỹ Tho. Lê Đức Anh, Deputy Commander of the Region, and Deputy Commander of the Campaign, led our forces toward the west and the south.

In the east, Army Corps 4, having liberated Xuân Lộc, neared Trảng Bom. Army Corps 2, Division 3 and Brigade 52 (Military Zone V) came within proximity to Long Thành, Vũng Tàu, Nước Trong, and Bà Rịa. Lê Trọng Tấn, Deputy Commander of the Campaign, led our troops toward the east.

All six regiments of special commandos, and dozens of commando detachments, stood ready to advance from the suburbs to the inner city.

At Thành Sơn Airfield, our air force also stood ready.

On our map of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign, red arrows now tightly encircled the last fortified enemy area.

Across the border, while all of this was happening, the Cambodian army and its people had managed to break the resistance of the Lon Nol troops along the periphery of Phnom Penh. Aided by our contribution of heavy shells, our Cambodian friends had bombarded the city center. On April 12, the United States organized an operation code-named "Hawk" and evacuated US advisers and soldiers from the capital city. On April 17, Phnom Penh was liberated.

The offices of our Army High Command worked day and night, in particular the 70th Bureau of the Military Intelligence Department which closely followed enemy activities with technical devices.

Sài Gòn was reported to be in utter chaos. South Vietnamese soldiers and civil servants from the area's northern provinces, especially Phan Rang, and Xuân Lộc, fled to Sài Gòn, bringing with them news and accounts of what they had witnessed. This made the situation still more dramatic. Civilians in Sài Gòn began to evacuate the city. Western embassies pulled out. Trần Văn Hương,

an old, blind and rheumatic man, replaced Thiệu and called for a "defence to the death" of Sài Gòn, but his plea fell on deaf ears. On April 23, at Tulane University in New Orleans, US President Gerald Ford stated: "The war in Việt Nam has come to an end for the United States."

Our long-awaited opportunity had finally appeared. I sent a message to our various columns urging them to prepare diligently for attack. I particularly stressed that the eastern column should attack Biên Hòa according to our plans.

On the morning of April 22, the Politburo convened a meeting. The Americans were reportedly on the verge of abandoning the impotent Trần Văn Hương and replacing him with someone who could more easily "enter into contact" with the National Liberation Front – a resort to diplomacy in a last-ditch effort to prevent our general offensive. The French were also reportedly willing to offer their mediation with the National Liberation Front and Hà Nội to save the situation.

After careful consideration, Lê Duẩn sent an urgent message to the battlefield.

'The US puppets are seeking to delay our offensive against Sài Gòn, to set up a new government, and to propose a cease-fire which would eventually lead to a political settlement – thereby saving the situation and preventing total defeat. The military and political opportunity for a general offensive against Sài Gòn has grown mature. Issue immediate instructions to the various troop directions to take timely action in coordination with military attacks and mass uprisings."

The Central Military Committee also sent an urgent message to Văn Tiến Dũng to convey the views of the Standing Board.

"The enemy lacks the determination to retrench itself in Sài Gòn when it is intensively attacked... It resorts to dilatory tactics to try to make a cease-fire proposal, to prolong the conflict until the rainy season begins... If it cannot defend Sài Gòn, it will withdraw to the Mekong Delta and use Cần Thơ as its center of operations... Our forces in the southwest and along Highway 4

must intercept and annihilate the enemy in case it withdraws from Sài Gòn to Cần Thơ."

On April 23, the French news agency AFP reported that South Vietnamese forces were using C130 planes to throw Daisy Cutler bombs[1] and CBU bombs[2] on targets between Biên Hòa and Xuân Lộc, causing hundreds of casualties. At 19h00 the same day, I sent the following message to the frontline:

"This may be the same kind of asphyxiation bomb (CB 455) proposed for use by Wayen. This might be an intimidation tactic. Regardless, we must take precautions. Lê Duẩn and the Standing Board of the Military Committee advise that we start our general offensive at an early date; this will create hostilities between our troops and the enemy. Our remote units must be carefully camouflaged. Take precautions against toxic gases... The 130-mm caliber guns and the D74 atilleries have launched powerful attacks against Tân Sơn Nhất and Biên Hòa air bases, causing heavy losses in the enemy's air force. Cần Thơ and Vũng Tàu airfields have been subjected to intense mortar shelling and special commando attacks."

On April 26, the Politburo met again while preparations were being completed in all areas from the Supreme Command to the Army High Command and to the main battlefield units. Trường Chinh, concerned about our military strategy, closely followed our final general offensive and uprising; he referred to them together as a "decisive blow".

According to the General Chief of Staff's Office, our main-force formations had been deployed in all directions of attack. After having fought to secure positions south and southwest of Sài Gòn, our local main-force units of B2 were also in place. The special commando forces and the forces of the Sài Gòn Municipal Committee were well-positioned in the suburbs, close to their

1. The Daisy Cutler bombs were used to destroy forest branches to clear areas likely to be used as parking places for helicopters.
2. The CBU (Cluster Bomb Units) were bombs that cause, after exploding, tremendously hot fires, creating a vacuum, burning down everything in its path, and asphyxiating all living creatures in affected areas.

assigned targets. Hundreds of cadres and members of armed groups took their positions in suburban "enclaves" and inside the city, ready to mobilize the masses to stage uprisings at the moment our main forces passed to the attack. Our troops enjoyed overwhelming superiority to the South Vietnamese troops. The leaders of grass-roots units and the mass political forces were ready.

The Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign selected five important targets: Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield; the General Chief of Staff's Office of the South Vietnamese army; the Presidential Palace; the Special Capital Zone; and the Police Headquarters.

With regard to our combat approach, the Campaign Command proposed that we encircle and isolate the South Vietnamese forces within the city, deploying our forces from each direction, while simultaneously wiping out the enemy outside the city proper. An important component of our forces would be organized as spearheads used to penetrate deeply into the center of Sài Gòn, then to occupy the five targets mentioned above. Subsequently, these forces would be deployed in coordination with special commando units, commandos, the city's self-defence units, and the uprising masses to occupy all military, political, and economic targets in Sài Gòn. A number of local special commandos, commandos and armed forces were entrusted with seizing the control of various bridges and joining firepower units in controlling the airfield and enemy artillery emplacements.

The key for us would be to achieve close coordination between our forces, launch quick attacks, and minimize the loss of troops and civilian casualties.

The Politburo received a lengthy message from Lê Đức Thọ, dated April 24, which clarified developments in the overall balance of power since our attack on Xuân Lộc. All ten of our divisions had reached their destination. The battlefield now presented a number of logistical difficulties, but our resolve was to try our best in the course of the fight and ensure the minimum conditions that were required for us to open the Campaign. The South Vietnamese could not yet assess our military approach. They employed dispositions to push us back from afar and were planning to destroy all bridges they were incapable of defending. We continued to prepare our

attacks and uprisings. It was determined that, if the South Vietnamese in fact destroyed important bridges, our troops would build new ones or simply fight without tanks and artillery.

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The decisive hour sounded.

The Nam Bộ battlefield erupted like a storm.

Domestic and foreign news agencies worked at full speed. Report followed report successively. World attention was drawn to the hot spot of Sài Gòn. The Voice of Việt Nam Radio, the Liberation Radio, and the mass media in both zones continuously announced news of our victory. In the press and radio broadcasts, there was virtually no time allotted to news other than the general offensives and uprisings we were carrying out. The news reached every home, every hamlet. The more active the front, the greater the impatience of the rear area to learn about developments.

In Hà Nội, our Army High Command offices worked 24 hours straight, day after day. The information and press services supplied the quickest, most precise military reports. The Combat Operations Department had to join the Propaganda and Training Department in communicating information to newspapers and the radio.

Deputy Chiefs of Staff Hoàng Văn Thái and Cao Văn Khánh remained on duty with me at our command post. The signal and decoding personnel took turns as all of us worked around the clock.

On the evening of April 27, our Combat Operations Department reported on the military situation on the approaches to Sài Gòn. Our troops carried out the majority of our combat plans from all directions.

In the north, Division 312 (Army Corps 1) made preparations to attack Bình Cơ and Bình Mỹ, thereby creating the possibility for the Army Corps to deploy forces throughout the suburbs.

In the northwest, Vũ Lăng, Commander of Army Corps 3, destroyed the enemy positions with mortar fire. Division 316 intercepted the enemy in Phú Mỹ and to the east of Trảng Bàng.

In the southwest, Lê Đức Anh dispatched troops to Highway 10, prepared for attacks on Highway 4, cut Sài Gòn off from the Mekong Delta, and opened a bridgehead across the Vàm Cỏ Đông River to occupy suburban areas.

In the east, Lê Trọng Tấn's column attacked Nước Trong Base, Long Thành Military Subsector and the provincial town of Bà Rịa. In Nước Trong, the enemy opposed stubborn resistance and launched reckless strafing raids and continuous counterattacks. Division 304 launched several indecisive waves of attack. Our troops were resolved to occupy Nước Trong Base at all costs, and especially to deploy an artillery position in Nhơn Trạch to shell Tân Sơn Nhất Air Base.

Based on recent military developments, the General Chief of Staff's Office made the following remarks: in the east, despite stubborn South Vietnamese resistance, the military situation was generally to our favor. In the north and northwest, our advance had been somewhat slower. The southwest might reach the speed of our other spearheads. Our troops' activities on Highway 4 had achieved significant results. With improvements, they would enable our forces in the north and northwest to develop the attack.

I sent this message to Tấn:

"Inform me at once of our scheduled attack on inner Sài Gòn, with detailed plans for if our targets are reached ahead of time. When a favorable opportunity arises and victory has been assured, continue to develop our attacks. If our 130-mm caliber gun emplacement in Nhơn Trạch is ready to be used to shell Tân Sơn Nhất, Sài Gòn will be shaken."

On the evening of April 28, Western news agencies reported that at 16h40, five American-made A37 planes showered bombs on Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield from an altitude of 5,000 feet. A number of US and "Republic of Việt Nam Air Force" planes were destroyed, including three AC119 and several C47. Our bombing raid

compelled the United States to evacuate its military and civilian personnel as quickly as possible. So pressing was the need to evacuate that the same day, at 20h00, two C130s, each carrying 180 persons, attempted take-off along the right side of the runway immediately after it had been bombed.

All of this lay within the combat scope of the High Command, whose intention was to employ air force divisions before and during our campaign to liberate Sài Gòn. This had been the subject of many discussions held by B2 comrades. At the beginning of April, Lê Ngọc Hiền reported in a telegram that we had captured a number of enemy combat planes; he proposed that we assign technical specialists to study their use and function. Afterwards, we received news that Nguyễn Thành Trung, one of our secret contacts engaging in underground activities from within enemy ranks, had safely landed on Phước Long Airfield after bombing the Presidential Palace in Sài Gòn. The General Chief of Staff's Office unanimously proposed to the Central Military Committee that we use US-trained, South Vietnamese pilots to train our own combat plane officers, and use our cache of newly-captured planes in the campaign; this, obviously, would catch the enemy entirely off-guard.

Văn Tiến Dũng sent a message proposing that our air force use captured planes to bomb the South Vietnamese army in Sài Gòn on April 28.

I reported this personally to the First Secretary, who enthusiastically agreed.

The High Command called Lê Văn Tri, Commander of the Air Defence-Air Force, to the "Dragon's House".

"How many captured A37 planes could we put to use?" I asked him.

"In Đà Nẵng," he replied, "we have one captured plane that our pilots are learning to fly. In Phù Cát Airfield, we have captured five intact planes, but we have not yet test- flown them."

"Good," I said. "The Politburo has agreed to let our air force bomb Sài Gòn. I am entrusting you with the task of organizing

this. As Dũng said in his message, the strike date will be April 28. Dũng will instruct you as to the exact timing and targets of attack. The exact combat approach will be decided by the General Chief of Staff's Office and the Vanguard Command of the Air Defence-Air Force.

On the afternoon of April 26, Tri arrived at Phù Cát. Hoàng Ngọc Diêu, Deputy Commander of the Army Formation, was also present. Preparation of the planes and personnel was thorough. Only two days from now, we would have a fleet of A37 ready for action. At 17h00 on April 28, this fleet, codenamed "Quyết Thắng" (Determined to Win Victory) and commanded by Nguyễn Thành Trung, destroyed 20 enemy planes on Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield.

Our surprise attack using American planes was militarily very effective, but its psychological effect was even greater. The enemy's morale was virtually crushed.

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On the evening of April 28, after two days of engaging in our general offensive, the General Chief of Staff's Office reported on the overall situation of the main battlefield:

In all directions, our troops on the whole accomplished our attack plans. We encircled and isolated Sài Gòn, cutting off the periphery of the city. We also cut off Highway 15 (Sài Gòn - Vũng Tàu) and Highway 4 (Sài Gòn-Mekong Delta), captured important targets such as Trảng Bom, Long Thành, Đức Thạnh, and Bà Rịa township, and established control over Nước Trong Base. Biên Hòa and Tân Sơn Nhất Airfields were rendered useless. In coordination with our main forces, local armed forces and people in the suburbs of Sài Gòn launched attacks and insurrections, liberating enemy-controlled areas around the city. In the Mekong Delta, our troops in Military Zones III and IX approached the towns of Cần Thơ and Mỹ Tho, and held Bình Thủy Airfield under constant threat.

The South Vietnamese army's command system, from its General Chief of Staff's Office to its army corps, fell into chaos.

Trần Văn Hương resigned and was replaced by Dương Văn Minh. Many high-ranking personages in South Việt Nam's army and administration fled overseas. Dương Văn inh was the last card in the South's administration to try cutting a deal with us in the hope of achieving a "cease fire".

Thus, after two days of fighting, the military situation developed favorably for us. According to our plan, on the following day, April 29, our troops from all five directions would commence attacking inner Sài Gòn.

At 22h00 that night, I sent the following message to Lê Đức Thọ and Phạm Hùng:

"Our campaign has started with brilliant victories. We are all elated, and wish you good health and total victory. Our staff and political offices need to issue, along with combat orders, specific directives on the task and domain of urban management of each unit. It is also necessary to accelerate our plan to develop victory, and wipe out or dissolve enemy troops in the Mekong Delta. Plans are to be worked out to reorganize our forces after the complete liberation of the South, and to determine what tasks must be achieved before the rainy season begins."

The Politburo and Central Military Committee members, their minds focused on the plans for our general offensives and uprisings, spent a sleepless night at the Headquarters' Office on April 28, 1975. Everyone was eagerly awaiting the "G" hour of the general attack on Sài Gòn as if waiting for the New Year's minute.

Early the following morning, the Politburo and Central Military Committee held a meeting at the command post.

A map of Sài Gòn-Gia Định was spread across the table. Leading comrades crowded around to follow the military developments.

Our strategic staff office tried its best to follow by every minute developments in our general offensives and uprisings. Lê Hữu Đức reported the latest battlefield news.

The red arrows on our map were now clustered in the direction of the inner city. Slash-marks indicated successively captured targets. Nearly every hour – at every instant, it seemed –

anew report was received. Those officials of the South Vietnamese army and administration who had fled overseas included MPs, the former prime minister, and army general chiefs of staff. Sài Gòn was steeped in chaos. The enemy soldiers were like beheaded snakes. American military and civilian personnel fled by helicopter from the rooftops of high-rise buildings in a "whirlwind" operation. Dương Văn Minh issued a cease-fire order and sent representatives to Tân Sơn Nhất's Camp David to request that the Joint Armistice Committee set up a meeting with our delegation for "negotiations"

The atmosphere of the meeting was one of elation. Those present listened to reports and exchanged views. Each new piece of information we received was an event itself, and always required timely action.

At 10h00, the First Secretary sent this urgent message to the battlefield:

"1. Order our troops to continue attacking Sài Gòn; in keeping with our plans, march forward vigorously; liberate and occupy the whole city; disarm the enemy troops; disband the enemy's administration at all levels; smash all manifestations of resistance on their part.

"2. Announce that Sài Gòn-Gia Định is now under authority of the Military Management Committee chaired by General Trần Văn Trà. Signed: Ba."

More reports poured in. Combat cadres, military intelligence cadres, signal and decoding staffs did not bother to rest or eat. Though nearly 2,000 km from Sài Gòn, everyone felt as though they were near the frontline, participating with compatriots in the offensives and uprisings and contributing to victory.

It was the evening of April 29.

I chaired the briefing, hearing a report from the Head of the Combat Operations Department on the overall military situation. Our columns in all five directions had simultaneously opened fire, engaged in coordinated battle, occupied their primary targets, and opened major breaches into the center of Sài Gòn.

In the northwest, Army Corps 3 wiped out Đồng Dù Base and captured Division Commander Lý Tòng Bá. The populations of Củ Chi rose up, occupying the district center.

In the north, Army Corps 1 occupied Tân Uyên township, encircled Phú Lộc, and marched towards Lái Thiêu.

In the southwest, Regiment 232 occupied the towns of Hậu Nghĩa and Tân An, Bến Lức township, and Đức Hòa Military Subsector. The people of Hóc Môn, Bà Điểm and Phú Thọ Hòa all rose up.

In the east, South Vietnamese forces stubbornly resisted. Although the advance of Army Corps 4 was slow, Army Corps 2 developed its attack under more favorable conditions. The "deep-thrust" unit of Army Corps 2 had crossed Long Bình Base and was developing its attack along the motorway.

In suburban areas, the general masses and local armed forces had risen up in coordination with our main-force formations. As our troops advanced, the liberated zone broadened. In general, South Vietnamese troops opposed weak resistance, rapidly disbanded, and either took to flight or surrendered when attacked.

According to our strategy, at 5h30 on April 30, 1975, our troops in all directions simultaneously struck at Sài Gòn.

Consistent with Lê Trọng Tấn's proposal, our eastern column opened fire first, at 18h00 on April 29. The reason for this was that our forces, still 15 to 20 km from the suburban areas, had to advance at the same time they were fighting the enemy. Furthermore, they had to cross the Đồng Nai and Sài Gòn Rivers. They could not arrive in time if they opened fire at the same time as the other units.

At midnight, when Tấn's message arrived, the Combat Operation Department woke me up. Half an hour later, land Lê Hữu Đức were at Lê Duẩn's home.

After Đức read the message, I suggested allowing our eastern column to open fire at 18h00 on April 29 -12 hours earlier than the "H" hour.

Lê Duẩn agreed, saying, "Yes, fight, fight, fight! At this moment, any column that successfully develops its attack will contribute to our Campaign's victory."

"The message was to be signed in your name, wasn't it?" I asked.

"No!" he said. "You are Commander-in-Chief, so you sign". An instant later, he added, "My name can also appear, or it can be made clear that the message was sent after we had exchanged views with Ba and received his agreement."

After arriving at Army Headquarters, I immediately sent a reply to Tấn; this was copied and delivered as well to Dũng. The Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign also agreed that the eastern column would open fire ahead of schedule.

Thus, at 18h00 on April 29, 1975, our attack on Sài Gòn- Gia Định commenced.

In the middle of the night, the Military Intelligence Department received an update on the enemy's situation. Cao Văn Khánh sent an urgent message to the various battlefields.

"The enemy has reportedly ordered its naval forces in Cần Thơ, Đồng Tâm and Phú Quốc to concentrate in a single location, and a number of landing craft are preparing to sail for Guam. Seventy eight planes of the puppets have been sent to Utapao... Enquire as to whether or not these naval craft carry infantrymen. Work out timely combat plans."

For one more night, the Headquarters sat up together with our troops in the battlefield, for the sake of the South, and for the sake of the whole country.

April 30, 1975.

Although over twenty five years have elapsed, this day in history remains as fresh in my mind as if it had happened only yesterday.

Earlier than usual, I sat down before my bureau at Headquarters. On the map spread out across the table, red arrows were concentrated in the center of Sài Gòn. In my mind, confronted as I was with so many duties, I sketched a program for the day: to

confer with the Politburo; to gather information on America's reaction; to plan additional military and political activity in case final victory was not possible at present; to give guidance on combat and uprisings in scattered, resisting areas after the liberation of Sài Gòn; to f send messages of exhortation to our troops and remind them of the need to fully comply with policies that would soon have to be carried out in the cities.

Suddenly, May 7, 1954 – victory day in Điện Biên Phủ - returned to memory. Of course, there were many differences between that victory and this one. Yet there was the same elated atmosphere at the Command Post, the same joy in greeting good news from the frontline and in reflecting on the job that would have to be carried out at the end of the campaign and then afterwards. There was one more impression that is particularly hard to describe: a mixture of elation, anxiety, happiness, and pride – with none of these feelings belonging to any single individual, but to the nation as a whole as it celebrated victory.

Lê Duẩn, Trường Chinh and Phạm Văn Đồng arrived earlier than usual, and were followed by other Politburo members. The Politburo and Central Military Committee met to exchange updates on military developments on the Sài Gòn - Gia Định battlefield, to discuss current tasks and objectives, and to celebrate the news of total victory. Cao Văn Khánh, who was on duty on that day, remained in the combat operations room and from time to time reported on the latest situation. Our troops' different spearheads of attack shifted quickly towards the center of the city. The final target of our campaign was near – in the vicinity of mere hours. Updates often interrupted our meeting, but everyone was obviously happy.

Khánh reported that US Ambassador Martin had fled from Sài Gòn at 4h15 a.m. His hope of holding talks with the *Việt Cộng* had burst like a bubble.

The "deep-thrust" formation of Army Corps 2 in the eastern column commanded by Lê Trọng Tấn was crossing the Đồng Nai River and wiping out enemy resistance in Thủ Đức just north of the Rạch Chiếc Bridge. Our artillery emplacement in Nhơn Trạch had fired over 300 shells on Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield. The first units were advancing from Tân Cảng Bridge into Sài Gòn, while Army Corps

4 was advancing towards Hố Nai. The enemy opposed a fierce resistance. We had wiped out Hố Nai, were attacking the headquarters of South Việt Nam's Army Corps 3, and preparing to march into Sài Gòn.

Division 10 of Army Corps 3 was marching on the Bảy Hiền crossroads.

Army Corps 1 attacked Lai Khê, Phú Lộc, and Lái Thiêu, and was marching into Gò Vấp. Another column was striking at the enemy from Bình Phước Bridge to Bình Triệu Bridge.

Regiment 232 was marching on the Special Capital Zone and the police headquarters.

On Highway 4, our troops had occupied Thủ Thừa and the town of Tân An.

Regiments Gia Định 1 and 2 approached just north of Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield and opened a corridor into the Bảy Hiền crossroads. Special commando forces occupied Rạch Chiếc Bridge and an unnamed bridge on the Biên Hòa Highway.

Our armed forces in Biên Hòa, in coordination with our main-force army, liberated Nhơn Trạch and Thành Tuy Hạ.

In suburban and urban areas of Sài Gòn, the masses coordinated with our army in attacking the enemy. In many districts, wards, and hamlets, insurgent populations occupied various enemy posts and South Việt Nam's administrative headquarters. The revolutionary flag was hoisted in Tây Nhì ward and Phú Nhuận district at noon on April 29.

In the Mekong Delta, our armed forces had surrounded important targets. They entered the provincial town of Bạc Liêu. In Sóc Trăng, they launched attacks against the town and its airfield.

The Politburo and Central Military Committee exchanged views on the most urgent tasks that we now faced. On behalf of the Politburo, I sent this message to our troops in the battlefield:

"The Military Management Committee is to broadcast at once the first order, the contents of which include:

"a. The Liberation Army is approaching to liberate Sài Gòn - Gia Định and complete our total liberation of the South.

"b. The troops of the Sài Gòn administration must lay down weapons and surrender at once.

"c. The Sài Gòn administrative apparatus is now disbanded at all levels.

"d. Our compatriots are called upon to rise and join the Liberation Army in smashing all enemy resistance, maintaining order and security, defending the people's lives and property, and achieving the total liberation of our beloved South Việt Nam."

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While following the Second Department's technical reports, I maintained radio communications with the Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign. Our various columns were advancing at full speed. The enemy had been forced into a very critical situation.

At 10h00 a.m., Nguyễn Thanh, Head of Bureau No 70, shared a report he had just received. According to a Japanese radio broadcast, the Liberation Army of the South, led by tanks, was entering Sài Gòn. A few minutes later, Dương Văn Minh was reported to have proposed a ceasefire in order to secure a new round of talks.

All of us agreed that there could only be unconditional surrender. There was nothing left to talk about!

I immediately ordered our columns to pursue their attacks. At the same time, the Command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign advised our various army corps and Regiment 232 to continue their advances despite the significant news.

At 10h50, the Second Department reported that our troops had entered the Presidential Palace in Sài Gòn. Right at that moment, Western radio stations broadcast the same news.

At 11h30, Nguyễn Duy Phê, Deputy Head of the Decoding Department, brought a message from Lê Trọng Tấn reporting that

a unit of the eastern column had flown the liberation flag on Independence Palace.

Everyone assembled around our military map. Reports flowed in from all directions. Our five columns had met in Sài Gòn. Army Corps 2 had occupied the Presidential Palace. Army Corps 4 had occupied the Defence Ministry, Bạch Đằng Harbor and the Radio Broadcasting Station. Army Corps 1 had occupied the General Chief of Staff's Office and the commands of the various formations. Army Corps 3 had occupied Tân Sơn Nhất Airfield. Regiment 232 had occupied the Special Capital Zone and the police headquarters. The combat operation of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign had reached a victorious end.

In an exultant atmosphere, our meeting discussed the last steps that would have to be taken. At 12h25 I sent a message to inform the battlefield of the views of the Politburo and Central Military Committee:

"Dương Văn Minh may call on enemy units to lay down their weapons – not in the capacity of a president but as a man who has rallied the people. We have been informed that the liberation flag was flown on Independence Palace at 11h00. All Politburo members are very, very glad."

The meeting was suspended.

All of the leading comrades walked out into the corridor. There was laughter, mirth, and elation everywhere. Tears of joy filled everyone's eyes.

I issued a directive to the Propaganda and Training Department of the General Political Department instructing that a message be sent at once to the Việt Nam News Agency and the Việt Nam Radio Station. They would be told to prepare a communique on our victory for immediate broadcast. Fifteen minutes later, the station suspended its usual program, and broadcast repeatedly the news that hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese were waiting to hear: The Hồ Chí Minh Campaign had ended in total victory. Mixed with the sounds of the loudspeaker, applause resounded in all the streets.

Brigadier General Cao Văn Khánh, Deputy Chief of the General Staff, Colonel Lê Hữu Đức, Head of the Combat Operations Department, and Colonel Nguyễn Trọng Yên and Lieutenant Colonel Phạm Chí Nhân, Head and Deputy Head of the Propaganda and Training Department respectively, were all present at the command post at 12h50. Having had the opportunity to live through such a historic hour, everyone wanted to commemorate the experience with a photo. Everyone stood before the map of Sài Gòn-Gia Định and followed the movement of my finger. Senior Lieutenant Nguyễn Tiến Trỗ, my bodyguard as well as an amateur photographer, snapped three photos of our jubilant group with his Kiev camera.

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That afternoon, the Politburo and Central Military Committee resumed their meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting, we listened to a recording of the surrender of South Việt Nam's President Dương Văn Minh:

"I am Dương Văn Minh, President of the Sài Gòn Administration. I hereby call for an unconditional surrender to the Liberation Army, the disbanding of the administrative structure from the central to the local level, and the handing over of power to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Việt Nam."

This was followed by the acceptance of Dương Văn Minh's surrender by the representatives of the Liberation Army.

Our meeting continued its discussion of the tasks we faced in the forthcoming period, raised issues to be considered at a May 3 meeting of the Politburo, and broached the preparations that would be necessary for the Plenum of the Party Central Committee.

Towards the end of the meeting, the participants were read two messages which had just been received from Lê Đức Thọ, Phạm Hùng and Văn Tiến Dũng, clarifying that Dương Văn Minh had surrendered and that our army columns continued their

advancements as planned. We called on enemy troops to give up their weapons. Provinces throughout the Mekong Delta were now rising up to overthrow the South's administration and install revolutionary power.

The standing members of the Central Military Committee stayed on after the Politburo members left, and discussed preparations for the committee meeting that was expected to be held on May 2. I offered additional advice on a number of tasks that would have to be performed well, especially the management of both newly liberated areas and big cities; the strengthening of revolutionary power at the same time we pursued remaining South Vietnamese soldiers; the capture of reactionary leaders; the maintenance of order and security; the protection of peoples' lives and public property; and the stabilization of living conditions. Each cadre and fighter must act as an agitator to mobilize the masses to join our revolutionary forces in securing control over territory. I also drew the attention of the General Chief of Staff's Office to the need we had of dealing with enemy troops in the Mekong Delta, on the Côn Sơn and Phú Quốc islands, and of receiving returning political detainees. The problems of building up and reorganizjng our forces under the conditions of the reunified country, and of the substantial quantities of enemy technical equipment we had recently captured, must be studied and carefully considered before suggesting solutions to the Politburo and Military Committee.

Alone in my working room, I suddenly grew overcome with joy. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"If only Uncle Hồ were still alive..."

Uncle Hồ's revolutionary and military thought had brought total victory to the cause of national liberation. His spring verse "Fight for the Americans to quit, fight for the puppets to be toppled" had charted the path to today's victory.

I took a drive around Hà Nội and discovered that the city had been transformed into a sea of flowers and flags. The streets were full of people festively celebrating. That night our capital city lit firecrackers to celebrate total victory. That night Hà Nội

and all of Việt Nam rejoiced together with Sài Gòn and the whole of the South.

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Returning to the western gate, I entered the Command Post and resumed my work. The photograph of our battlefield leaders and commanders had been developed, and showed certain conspicuous features. No doubt, I thought, these comrades had spent many sleepless nights. And no doubt they are as elated as we are here.

In my message to Văn Tiến Dũng and the members of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign Command, I, on behalf of the Central Military Committee, commended our armed forces. They had joined our compatriots in the general offensives and uprisings to liberate Sài Gòn-Gia Định, and recorded resounding victories.

A beloved, familiar face emerged in my mind: Major General Lê Trọng Tấn, the Commander of the first column to enter the Presidential Palace of South Việt Nam's administration. I wrote to him, disregarding the formal format of a military message:

"18h30. Brother Tấn! You have produced excellent work! What happiness you have caused me! Wishing you excellent health. Convey my congratulations of victory to all generals there. Signed: Văn".

I later learned that the whole command of the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign, upon hearing that our troops had taken Independence Palace, followed by Dương Văn Minh's surrender statement, was overjoyed by the news of victory. Lê Đức Thọ, Phạm Hùng, and Văn Tiến Dũng embraced everyone with emotion.

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It was the morning of May 1, 1975.

International Labor Day now assumed the additional meaning of "Victory Day". The class character combined with the

national one, highlighting a fine characteristic in Uncle Hồ's revolutionary thought.

At Headquarters, the General Chief of Staff's Office reported on developments in the Mekong Delta and in the islands that remained for us to liberate. When learning of Dương Văn Minh's surrender statement, our armed forces succeeded in coordinating with the majority of provincial mass uprisings – such as in Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng, and Cà Mau, among others – in which participants sometimes numbered in the tens of thousands. Strong attacks were launched against the South's army and administration, compelling them to surrender. In Cần Thơ, on the night of April 29, Division 4 attacked Bình Thủy and Trà Nóc Airfield, the Tây Đô Battalion and Battalion 303 (combining combat with propaganda efforts among enemy troops), as well as the enemy command post in the city. Nguyễn Khoa Nam, Commander of Tactical Zone IV, killed himself. On the afternoon of April 30, Cần Thơ province was also liberated.

In Vĩnh Long and Trà Vinh, despite attacks launched by our army and people, part of the enemy garrison opposed fierce resistance on the night of April 29 and the morning of April 30. At 17h00 on April 30, the Vĩnh Long provincial governor and the commander of the South's Division 9 were compelled to surrender. On the same day, behind two battalions and the insurgent masses (which involved the broad participation of Buddhist monks), we liberated Trà Vinh.

After capturing important cities and provincial towns, we deployed our forces to penetrate deeply into areas where a vast majority of populations were religious believers – such as Long Xuyên, Châu Đốc, and Sa Đéc – and compelled the surrender of many enemy posts. In the rural areas of Nam Bộ, hundreds of military subsectors and thousands of enemy posts disintegrated or surrendered before the attacks and uprisings of our army and people. The whole delta of the Tiền and Hậu Rivers was liberated.

On April 30 and May 1, 1975, revolutionaries detained by South Vietnamese forces in Côn Sơn rose up, destroyed the jails that housed them, and liberated the island. In combination with political detainees, local forces on Phú Quốc Island launched attacks and

liberated the area even before our forces arrived from the mainland. On May 2, 1975, there were no remaining enemy forces in the whole of South Việt Nam.

The Hồ Chí Minh Campaign ended in triumph. Our general offensives and uprisings, part of the final strategic battle of our army and people, resulted in total victory.

Our great victory in the Spring of 1975 brilliantly resulted from the launching of three strategic blows: the Tây Nguyên Campaign, the Huế-Đà Nẵng Campaign, and the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign. All three campaigns were carried out in combination with military and political attacks, revolutionary activities among South Vietnamese troops and people, and through our engagement in general offensives and uprisings. To these must be added two thrusts of attack outside the purview of our overall plan. One thrust included the formation of the strong and highly effective eastern column, which enabled our struggle to strengthen rapidly, and culminated in the final, decisive battle that witnessed our annihilation of the enemy in its last hideout. Our second thrust includeathe attack we carried out in territorial waters, which led quickly to the liberation of the Trường Sa Archipelago and various offshore islands, followed by the complete liberation of the South. Here, our strong military strikes bore decisive significance. The people's extensive, multitudinous insurrections represented extremely effective strategic blows against the enemy everywhere, and helped bring about quick victory.

An interesting, historic coincidence is worth noting here: Both 20th century resistances in Việt Nam ended with 55-day fights. If at Điện Biên Phủ, 55 days and nights constituted the required time for a protracted attack on a solid, retrenched camp conducted under the motto "steady fight and steady advance", then the 55 days and nights of the general offensives and insurrections in the South represented an ending to the war that unfolded at an unexpectedly remarkable speed. Whether short or long in duration, time is always strength.

On the afternoon of May 1, I made a visit to the Combat Operations Department, which directly served the military command and was then in an atmosphere of total exultation.

Virtually everyone was there. A protracted blast of fire- crackers greeted the news of victory. I enquired about Hoàng Văn Thái, who was absent on business, then embraced Cao Văn Khánh, the staff cadres, the decoding and information cadres, and typists. I said that throughout my 30 years of army leadership, our staff work had made the most wonderful progress of all. From drafting combat plans, to comprehending fully the enemy situation and our own, and to the conveying of orders, everything was exact and efficiently carried out. Then I visited the Propaganda and Training Department, which assisted the Military Committee and the High Command in their ideological work with the army and also in their publicity and press work. Lê Quang Đạo, on behalf of the Political Department and the whole propaganda and training agency, welcomed me very warmly. I commended their excellent results on the ideological and public opinion front, recalling the spirit of Uncle Hồ's teaching: Victory, no matter how great, is only a single step on the ten-thousand-mile journey of the revolution; conceit and subjectivism are absolutely not allowed.

Due to limited time, I could call only on two bodies that regularly assisted the High Command and Central Military Committee. Preparations for the meeting of the Military Committee and Politburo in the following days did not allow me to make more visits. In my heart, I wanted to visit all the offices of our Headquarters, because in this great collective feat, I understood that all organizations and individuals had made contributions. I wanted to embrace all my comrades.

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A few days later, I accompanied Lê Duẩn on a visit to the liberated South. Unforgettable was the joy I again felt upon setting foot on the city that would soon bear Uncle Hồ's name, and the emotions I now felt watching the celebrations of victory by my compatriots and comrades on the streets. It was as if I had been allowed to welcome Uncle Hồ back from where he had gone to achieve our national salvation. We called on our revolutionary contacts in Sài Gòn, Biên Hòa, Cần Thơ, Rạch Giá, and many other

place – the cradles which had nurtured and protected so many loyal cadres who had left to undertake revolutionary activity without knowing whether or not they would return. Lê Duẩn emotionally introduced to me the "fathers" and "mothers"[1] who had nurtured him during his days of underground activity in the enemy zone. Face-to-face with these old sights and acquaintances, I recalled fondly those occasions when I traveled to the South on revolutionary missions. In 1929, in the capacity of envoy of the Tân Việt General Committee and of the communist group in Tân Việt, I came to Sài Gòn with the task of converting Tân Việt members into communists. Six years later, I returned to meet the Party members who were carrying out semi-open revolutionary activities, and to receive documents of the Indochina Congress for transport to Hà Nội. I sought my old "contacts", but almost all of them had died. Many pioneers and early supporters of our revolution would never see our nation's day of victory.

Thereafter, I called on our main-force formations, units of special commandos and commandos, and local troops. Uncle Hồ's army, which had just accomplished such remarkable feats, were very humble and gracious. I commended the military achievements of arms of the cadres and fighters, recalling with emotion so many of our comrades and companions-in-arms who had fallen to preserve their Motherland.

I also visited the South Vietnamese army's General Chief of Staff's Office, where my attention was drawn to what was left of the calendar leaf for April 28. In the weapons showroom, their exhibits included many types of modern weapons and equipment. An Indochinese map full of blue and red marks showed where their electronic equipment had detected our bases, especially on the Trường Sơn strategic transport route. My deepest impression came from seeing the US weapons and technical facilities. However modern they were, they could not save the enemy from defeat. The decisive factor in our remarkable victory was the Vietnamese spirit.

1. A familiar way to address the elderly in Nam Bộ.

*Chapter X*

# SOME REFLECTIONS

I would like to devote the last pages of these memoirs to pondering on our people's 30-year-long march to liberate and defend the nation under the glorious flag of the Party. The further I look back into the past, the clearer I see the future.

Our victory day of April 30, 1975 has entered the annals of history.

In the Vietnamese revolutionary line since the birth of the Communist Party, three milestones – the August General Uprising (1945), Điện Biên Phủ (1954), and our remarkable victory in the Spring of 1975 – will stand out forever in the history books. The Vietnamese people have achieved a feat that would have seemed impossible in the middle of the 20th century. For the first time in history, the people of a colonial, semi-feudal, underdeveloped country defeated imperialist powers, mainly with their own forces, setting an example for the whole world of heroism, undauntedness, intelligence and ability.

Our epic victory over the French and the Americans resounds forever across our land and across all continents.

Vietnamese acknowledges the merits of its martyrs – its beloved children who laid down their lives for their people and country in "the determination to fight for the survival of the Motherland"[1].

History records that the foremost merit belongs to our late President Hồ Chí Minh, our hero of national liberation, a strategist of genius, an outstanding man of culture, and the beloved founder of Việt Nam's armed forces.

1. This is a motto launched by the populations of Hà Nội during the second anti-French war (1945-1954).

The victory of our people is also a victory of people in fraternal countries who extended wholehearted support and assistance to Việt Nam in its struggle against aggression and imperialism.

Over 25 years have passed since our victory in the Spring of 1975. Mankind is at the threshold of the 21st century – a new millennium. At this important juncture, it is necessary to look back at our nation's past. In order to draw lessons of national construction and defence for the present and the future, we must study our culture, our military past, and review our 30-year-long fight under the leadership of the Party and Uncle Hồ.

Many people have asked these questions: *Why have the Vietnamese people, without possessing so much as an inch of steel, been able to stand tall, smash the shackles of slavery, vanquish two imperialist giants in unequal wars, gain back their lost lands, and march forward to social and human liberation*?

The answer to this question can not be found if one does not have insight into history, our national culture, the traditions and military heritage of our forefathers, and the line of the Vietnamese revolution under the leadership of the Communist Party.

In fact, one event that is rarely found in discussions of world history is that ancient Việt tribes had developed early on a philosophy of life, given shape to and developed a national culture whose core was *patriotism* – a spirit of dauntless struggle to master nature and society, rally together as one, and show both courage and intelligence in the most unfavorable of national circumstances. Due to the immeasurable strength of our culture, which was never assimilated by the Chinese after more than one thousand years of their domination, Việt Nam ultimately had risen up and regained it dependence. When the founder of our independent State – national hero Ngô Quyền – defeated the Southern Han invaders on the Bạch Đằng River[1], the one-thousand-year era of our nation's independence and sovereignty was then established. Throughout these one thousand years, our nation, under various dynasties of kings, vanquished all

1. In Quảng Ninh province, northeast of Việt Nam.

aggressors many times stronger than ourselves, from the Sung[1] and Yuan[2] to the Ming[3] and Qing. During the 13th century, on three separate occasions, our nation defeated the Yuan-Mongol troops that had conquered nations across Europe and Asia and occupied the entire Chinese mainland. *Nam quốc sơn hà Nam đế cư*[4]. Whenever an enemy attacks our country, "the king and his subjects are of one mind, the brothers are united, the whole country joins forces, and all its people become soldiers" in order to defend and preserve the country. From the *Hịch Tướng Sĩ* (Appeal to Officers and Soldiers)[5] to the *Bình Ngô đại cáo* (Proclamation of Victory over the Wu)[6], a Vietnamese military philosophy took shape and developed: *"To defeat wickedness with thejust cause, to replace tyranny with generosity", "to oppose a numerically greater force with a numerically smaller one", "to win great victories with small forces"*. This theory applies the dialectical methods of turning weakness into strength, to combine forces, potentialities, opportunities, subterfuge, and in the end regaining and preserving national sovereignty with thoughts bypassing the epoch: *"to stifle war forever"* and *"to bring about eternal peace"*.

Here, a new question arises: Why did Việt Nam have to live in slavery for over 100 years under the yoke of Western colonialism and imperialism?

Obviously there were no small number of factors contributing to this dark period in Việt Nam's history, including the Nguyễn dynasty's (1802-1945)[7] wrongful policies that ran counter to our national interests. But in the final analysis, the principal factor was the crisis of guideline at a moment when the balance of power between our own military forces and those of our enemy had fundamentally changed: our country remained in a feudal mode of production, had an unprogressive agricultural economy and an army possessing only rudimentary weapons and equipment, while

1, 2, 3. Chinese feudal dynasties, 10th to 14th centuries.
4. "The mountains and rivers of the Southern land are reigned by the Southern kings" (written by Lý Thường Kiệt).
5. Written by Trần Hưng Đạo, 13th century.
6. Written by Nguyễn Trãi, 15th century.
7. The last feudal dynasty in Việt Nam which took Huế city as its capital.

the enemy was a more modern country with capitalist modes of production, possessing modern industry and an army richly endowed with weapons and equipment. In view of our struggle's new realities, the Vietnamese at that time could not determine a viable plan for national salvation. All patriotic movements that occurred in the early 20th century, from Nguyễn Trung Trực[1] to Hoàng Hoa Thám[2], from the Cần Vương[3] to the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục[4], and from Đông Du[5] to Duy Tân[6], fell into impasses which offered no way out. This was the reason that, despite the heroism of these patriots, all insurrection movements from the South to the North were savagely repressed. Our patriotic leaders only became "famous personalities"; our national salvation movement failed to achieve "success".

In 1911, the young Nguyễn Tất Thành[7] left Việt Nam in search of a path to national salvation. He carried with him knowledge about our strong, patriotic tradition, the spirit of the Vietnamese people's dauntless struggles, and the best characteristics of Oriental culture. He travelled all over the world with aspirations to return to Việt Nam to liberate the "parias"[8]. In 1920, Nguyễn Ái Quốc[9] – another great patriot – discovered Leninism and the Third International, finding a solution for Việt Nam's national salvation: *the path of proletarian revolution.* He subsequently became Việt Nam's first Communist. From that time, our nation was closely attached to the working class, national interest was attached to international interest, and national independence was attached to socialism. From his studies of Marxism-Leninism, Nguyễn Ái Quốc assimilated broad revolutionary outlooks, developed Marxist-Leninist methodology, particularly that of historical materialism and dialectical materialism.

With Việt Nam's new revolutionary objective, our patriotic struggles would not only bring independence and unity to the country, but also freedom and happiness to the working class and

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. Armed uprisings and patriotic movements launched by Vietnamese people against the French in early 20th century.

7. Hồ Chí Minh's name in the time when he was in search of a path to national salvation.
8. A French word, which means "extremely miserable man". It is also tittle of a newspaper in Paris whose Chief editor during the 1920s was Hồ Chí Minh.
9. Another name of Hồ Chí Minh.

the laboring people – *all* Vietnamese people. Việt Nam's war of liberation was, in fact, a just war "for the people" and "by the people" – a war boundlessly capable of overthrowing any enemy. With the *Short Political Program*[1], the *Short Tactics*[2], the *Appeal on the Occasion of the Founding of the Party*[3], the way to national salvation must necessarily follow the *Revolutionary Path*[4] under guidance of the vanguard Party – the Communist Party of Việt Nam. After years of struggle, our revolution was carried out to perfection in 1941 when the Party placed primacy on the issue of national liberation, rallied all patriotic forces in the Việt Minh Front[5], initiated an armed insurrection, and led the August Revolution to victory.

Based on the Party's revolutionary line, Vietnamese military theories advanced significantly, and resolved in the conditions of the new epoch a capital problem which was apparently a paradox: *"to defeat a large force even we are smaller"*, *"to defeat a strong force even we are weaker"*, and *"to defeat a numerically greater force even we are numerically smaller"*. Vietnamese military theory constantly strives for deeper understanding and application of revolutionary aims, Marxist-Leninist and Hồ Chí Minh thought. It proceeds from reality, analyzes situations practically, determines the rule of combat and acts in conformity with them, and vanquishes its enemy. On the battlefield, it constantly follows military developments and the balance between our own forces and those of the enemy; seeks out and creates advantageous opportunities; creates a strong potentiality for ourselves; exacerbates the enemy's weaknesses; and concentrates its forces on destroying the enemy. And when the military situation changes, it changes its strategies and tactics; exhibits dynamism, initiative, mobility, and flexibility; maintains secrecy; and records the most comprehensive victory (usually in the most difficult of conditions).

To promote to the highest extent the following concepts: *"Determined to fight and to win victory"* and *"Nothing is more precious*

1, 2, 3, 4. Works written by Hồ Chí Minh.

5. A mass organization set up by the Communist Party of Việt Nam to rally the united bloc of the entire country.

*than independence and freedom"*[1]; to inspire creativity and cultivate the talents of each individual and the nation as a whole; to attain our present level of cultural and societal distinction, our army and people first had to achieve remarkable military victories.

*To persistently pursue revolutionary objectives, to apply the world outlook, the practical viewpoint. Marxist-Leninist methodology and Hồ Chí Minh thought constitute lessons of a revolutionary and scientific character bearing a great significance of the Vietnamese military theory in the Hồ Chí Minh era. Strict compliance with these lessons will lead to success. Failure to do so will result in mistakes and defeats.*

It is to be remembered that early in August 1945, President Hồ Chí Minh clearly recognized the revolutionary opportunities we had before us. He decided to convene the National Congress[2] in mid-August, even though their representatives would not be in full attendance. On August 13, 1945, the Party Central Committee issued the order for a general insurrection, providing the way for the August Revolution to succeed in Hà Nội and the whole country within a week. The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam was founded at that time.

We endured nine years of difficult, protracted resistance against the French. At Điện Biên Phủ, when realities on the battlefield had shifted, we changed our philosophy from "a quick fight and quick victory" to "a steady advance". We modified our original plan of wiping out the enemy in the course of three nights and two days to a plan of continuous fighting over a period of 55 successive days and nights. Our army and people finally destroyed the strongest retrenched French camp – a fortress that had been assisted by the United States and considered "impregnable" by both the French and the Americans.

In our 21-year resistance against the US, the general offensive and insurrection in the Spring of 1975 exemplified the soundness

1. Hồ Chí Minh. *Complete Works*. 2nd edition. National Political Publishing House, Hà Nội, 1996, Vol. 12, p. 108.
2. A Congress representing all people in Việt Nam was held in Tân Trào and Tuyên Quang. This Congress elected the National Liberation Committee (chaired by Hồ Chí Minh) in preparation for the August 1945 General Insurrection.

of Vietnamese military theory. Following extremely rapid developments on the battlefield, the Supreme High Command made timely decisions whenever new opportunities arose; the initial, basic plan of liberating the South in two to three years was changed to an opportunity plan to be completed in one year. The decision was then made to end the war prior to the rainy season. Ultimately, total victory was won in less than two months.

*Independence and sovereignty, intelligence and creativity* are prominent concepts in Vietnamese military theory.

Throughout the history of our forefathers' fight against the enemy, especially since the Lý[1] and Trần[2] dynasties, our predecessors read many books of ancient Chinese military strategists, although they did not always advocate "a quick fight and quick decision" or the necessity of assembling a force ten times stronger than that of the enemy before launching an attack. During recent years of resistance, Vietnamese generals have assimilated the essence of military science and theory from around the world, but have always fought in the Vietnamese way. This is precisely why we have always won victory.

In 1971, I traveled to the Soviet Union to assert our resolve to triumph over the US and to propose that the USSR provide us with special assistance. In a meeting withmembers of the Politburo of the Soviet Communist Party, Comrade Kosygin[3] asked me: "Comrade Giáp, you contend that Việt Nam will defeat the US. I would like to know how many motorized infantry divisions you have and how many the US has. And how many tanks, heavy guns, and combat planes you have, and how many are available to the United States? What about your capability in the areas of air defence, missiles, signals, and radar".

"I understand," I replied. "You want to know about the balance of power between our own forces and those of the United

1. A Vietnamese feudal dynasty (1010-1225) which succeeded militarily in turning back Chinese Song aggressors.
2. A Vietnamese feudal dynasty (1225-1400) which recorded military victories in three wars (1258, 1285 and 1288) against the Yuan-Mongols from the North.
3. Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the (former) Soviet Union.

States. Soviet military theory demands this. Soviet military theory is an excellent one; it defeated the German fascists. This is perfectly clear. But I would like to suggest that if we engage in your way of combat, we will not be able to stand for two hours. We are fighting a different way, the Vietnamese way, and we will win." After our victory in the war, I had an opportunity to return to the Soviet Union and reunite with Kosygin. I formally thanked the Soviet Union for having generously assisted Việt Nam in our war against the US. He heartily congratulated me on Việt Nam's astounding victory.

A governing idea in the Vietnamese people's war was that: *The whole of our people fight the enemy. The whole country fights the French and the Americans.* There is no distinction between the frontline and the rear. The will to re-unite Việt Nam was a strong force and potentiality during the war. Việt Nam is one country. The Vietnamese are one nation. The Vietnamese battlefield is one. The whole nation forms a single bloc comprised of the indivisible Hồng Lạc[1] race. The entire nation shares one hatred and one debt. The whole country rose up to smash the shackles of slavery, and together it accomplished the August Revolution. The French staged a comeback in Nam Bộ. The Northern and Central zones volunteered to head South. Bắc Bộ was the main battlefield. Trung Bộ and Nam Bộ engaged in dedicated, coordinated efforts. The South was our great frontline, and "directly determined" our victory. The North was our great rear area, and played "the most decisive role" overall. Under a rain of US bombs, the North responded with a valiant riposte, provided human and material assistance to our troops fighting in the front, and did all of this for our brethren in the South. The whole country acted in the interest of the South. The South acted in the interest of the whole country. The South called, and the North responded. A strike

1. Legend has it that the founder of the Vietnamese nation was King Dương Vương, whose tomb is in An Lữ village, Thuận Thành district, Bắc Ninh province. King Dương Vương reigned earlier than 2000 BC. He married the daughter of Thần Long, who was the Lord of Động Đình Lake. He had a son, named Sùng Lãm, who succeeded him under the title of Lạc Long Quân. Hồng belonged to the Hồng Bàng family. Lạc means Lạc Long Quân. Lạc Long Quân married Âu Cơ, who birthed 100 eggs that gave rise to 100 sons. These sons are considered, by legend, the ancestors of the Bách Việt people.

dealt by the enemy against the North brought about counterstrikes five or ten times stronger from the South. Over one million cadres and fighters from the North "cut the Trường Sơn Range lengthwise" to serve our country. Among them, hundreds of thousands lost their lives on the battlefield. This is a glaring statistic.

During the years of anti-French and anti-American resistance, we failed at times to maintain the military line as set out by the Party as well as by the military theories of Hồ Chí Minh. We did not act in accordance with certain realities and laws that governed social development; we indulged in subjectivism and voluntarism. As a result, we limited the scale of our victories while sustaining heavy losses.

For a time, the relationship between guerilla war and conventional war was a subject of prolonged debate among military cadres on the battlefield. A number of comrades entertained misconceptions; devoted too much attention to intensifying our political struggle; showed too much concern with guerilla warfare, and the building up of our political forces along with our local armed forces, militia and guerillas; and disregarded the development of our main forces. A number of foreign strategists and scholars on Việt Nam typically held that the people's war was equivalent to guerilla war. This, however, is utterly wrong. Our Party never had a purely military strategy; nor had it ever restricted the war to the level of guerilla warfare. The Party's revolutionary war represented an overall strategy combining military, political and diplomatic struggles, guerilla warfare with conventional warfare, and small-, medium-, and large-scale operations. While stepping up our political struggle and developing guerilla warfare, our Party attached great importance to the development of main-force troops into strong formations, and to expanding battalions, regiments and divisions into army corps which would become "steel fists" capable of annihilating the enemy on the battlefield.

Following is another instance of our failure to comprehend fully the laws governing uprisings and war. We once advocated a general uprising during the war while on the battlefield there

were more than half a million US troops and over one million South Vietnamese soldiers and other foreign, supporting troops. Our general offensive and uprising of Spring Mậu Thân (1968) taught us a crucial lesson. The simultaneous, surprise general attacks on the cities and almost all the enemy's major logistic bases resulted in resounding victory, foiled the enemy's "special war" strategy, and compelled the United States to de-escalate the war. Instead of shifting our activities to rural areas, we advocated a continuation of attacks on urban areas with a view to a general uprising. In the end, there was no general uprising and our revolution suffered heavy losses.

Here is another instance of our having to suffer heavy casualties due to acting at variance with the aforementioned law. Revolution is by its very nature offensive. The strategic thought behind our revolutionary war has always been in essence offensive. As for our approach to combat, there are both offensive and defensive combat strategies and campaigns. However, due to incorrect understanding, a number of cadres held that in a protracted war there is only offense, to the exclusion of defense. For this reason, in a number of fights, our troops sustained unnecessary losses.

In recent years, the United States and other countries have developed more modern weapons and military equipment. The arms race continues. Along with the appearance of anew strategy in which "human rights" are placed over and above the importance of "sovereignty", a number of warlike forces arrogated to themselves the right to aggress an independent and sovereign State in defiance of international law. After the Gulf War (1991), another war developed in Kosovo. A new question arose with regard to Việt Nam: In a war that employs such high-tech weapons as we see being used and further developed today, does the Vietnamese military theory remain valid?

We have never indulged in subjective underestimation of the enemy. We have always paid due regard to research in military science, its applications and techniques, and to the adaptation of our military theory to new developments that arise. And we can affirm right now that Vietnamese military theory in the Hồ Chí

Minh era remains positioned to defend the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of our country, and to defeat any war of aggression no matter where it comes from.

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*Vietnamese culture, the revolutionary line of our Party, and our original, creative, and constantly developing military theories constitute the force of Việt Nam in the Hồ Chí Minh era.*

Comprehension of these basic points will make it possible to answer the questions that have been raised.

After our army and people smashed the strikes of US B52 strategic bombers, the French historian Pierre Risa Feray rightly stated: "The SAM missiles put to use by the ideal of poverty, by the Vietnamese culture, by *Vietnamity* are in our views the key to the victory of Việt Nam."[1]

If the enemy fails to understand this point, his defeat is a matter of course.

The late J.F. Kennedy, Jr. visited Việt Nam with the worthy intention of trying to understand the mistakes his father had committed against our peaceful, friendly country. After visiting Pắc Bó, he asked himself how in those hard days, living in a desert grotto, the Vietnamese could sustain their belief in victory. Moreover, we had won victory even when France and the United States had put forth their best war efforts possible. When he heard me speak briefly about the culture and history of Việt Nam, he was very happy – as if he had come to understand what the Kennedy, father and son, had not previously understood.

In November 1995, by US proposal, I received Mr. Robert McNamara, the former Defence Secretary under President Kennedy and President Johnson and one of the architects of the war against Việt Nam. During our talks, I made the following remark:

1. Pierre Risa Feray. *Việt Nam from the Faraway Origin to Today,* French University Press Publishing House, 1990, p. 87.

"In my opinion, your memoir[1] correctly states that the United States fought against Việt Nam without understanding her history, geography, culture, customs, traditions, the Vietnamese man, the Vietnamese nation, and in particular the Vietnamese leaders. We have a long-enduring culture, and an original military theory which has been tested many times throughout history. It is because of this that we won."

"Yes," McNamara replied. "This is true."

In the end, he had realized a truth, but regrettably it had come much too late!

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Our final battle in the Spring of 1975 marked a brilliant new development in the art of the people's war, and particularly with regard to the art of conducting war in its concluding stages and of organizing and engaging in decisive, large-scale battles – which led our resistance to total victory.

Among the subjective factors in our victory, mention must be made of the strategic military bodies at the Headquarters. Through 55 days and nights, everyone from the leadership down to basic personnel worked dedicatedly for our supreme command to direct our troops to victory on the various battlefields and in the rear area.

Our victory in the war resulted from the immense efforts and sacrifices made by the whole country in our fierce, protracted test of strength against the enemy. It also resulted from the leadership and guidance provided at a macro-level, combined with the combat activities of each battlefield and unit. In the overall war effort, the Politburo, Central Military Committee, and strategic staff bodies played a particularly important role. In the Spring of 1975, the Supreme Command clearly showed its capability. It understood

1. McNamara. *Looking Back at the Past. The Tragedy and the Lessons on Việt Nam,* National Political Publishing House, Hà Nội, 1995. (Vietnamese translation)

both the enemy and ourselves, and directed all facets of our war operations throughout the country. It worked with diligence, flexibility, circumspection, and certitude of victory in the extremely complex international context of the mid-1970s. All campaigns followed the unified plan of the High Command. There was close coordination between specific plans and campaigns, creating premises for one another and also the conditions necessary for shaping our final, decisive blow.

In pondering over the role of the strategic military bodies, I recall with emotion my close companions-in-arms in the Politburo, Central Military Committee, Defence Ministry, and High Command during the long years of our resistance. Some of them are no longer alive. They used to worry together about the affairs of the people and the Party, and shared the joy of having accomplished the tasks that had been entrusted to them. Each of their faces reminds me of their affectionate personalities, and provides me with a long list of good memories I have accumulated during a life dedicated to combat for the people and country of Việt Nam. Their images will remain forever imprinted in my heart.

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Since Việt Nam regained total independene and re-united, Vietnamese people from the South to the North are together again under the same roof. They have firmly taken on the two critical tasks of re-building and continuing to defend their country.

In developing our economy and promoting our culture, two critical tasks that Việt Nam now faces, our Party has returned to the political views that were championed by Hồ Chí Minh. Our Party has proceeded from modern realities, determined the most effective laws governing social development, and mapped out a sound, innovative *policy of renovation.* This policy has encouraged the working class, laborers, and our nation as a whole to pursue success on the economic, cultural and diplomatic fronts. Our Party has reached this historic conclusion: *Marxist-Leninist and Hồ Chí Minh thought constitute a strong ideological foundation and guide for action.* Our people have emerged from their crisis and are

advancing along the path to industrialization- modernization with a multi-faceted economy and a socialist- oriented, State-managed market mechanism.

Yet, however successful our renovation line proves to be, we must courageously face the truth and not mistakenly indulge in "Communist conceit". We must admit that Việt Nam is still *one of the poorest countries in the world.* The economy relies to a great extent on agriculture. *Labor productivity* is hundreds of times lower and *our technological standard* is centuries behind that of the developed countries. Thus, in order to achieve our target of socialist construction, the main contradictions in our socio-economic form of production are between those requirements of very high standards of development in the forces of production; improving people's material and cultural livelihoods; and overcoming step by step general poverty while modernizing the country on a wide scale. Mention should also be made of the moral degradation and "social evils" that are brought about by the market mechanism.

In the meantime, the world is undergoing great change. A number of developed countries are entering a new socio-economic epoch – that of the knowledge-based, information-rich economy. In those countries, services and intelligence have become primordial production forces. On that basis, a new world order has emerged with a trend toward globalization. This involves the whole planet in a great whirlwind controlled by the United States, a few other superpowers, and various transnational conglomerates. Side by side with humankind's aspirations for lasting world peace, tribal and religious conflicts rage on simultaneously with an unprecedented, high-tech arms race.

While preparing to enter the 21st century, Việt Nam's Party, working class, and people are being confronted with great opportunities as well as new and unprecedented challenges. As previously, during major shifts in our national struggle for liberation, our Party has proceeded from experience, working out innovative new policies in accordance with laws that govern revolutionary wars.

That is our policy for the *priority productive forces.* As Marx asserted, "the productive forces are the premise of all premises" of

socialism and communism, and of course have an obvious relationship to production.

The number one State policy is *education and training, and science and technology,* because science and intelligence have become primordial production forces. Advanced technology is the basis and motivating force of modernization.

That is *the promotion to a high of the internal forces of the country,* mainly of man; on this basis, to integrate ourselves within the region and the world by our own initiative, and to strive to acquire sources of capital, technology, and management proficiency from foreign countries.

Another crucial policy is *to reorganize and strengthen the Party,* make it more pure and effective, enable it to develop and apply vanguard theories, enhance revolutionary virtues, eliminate social evils, and be comprehensively regarded as a source of conscience, honor, and intelligence for the working class and the nation itself; on this basis, our final objective is to readjust the State of the people, for the people, and by the people, and to strengthen and broaden our national united front.

On all levels, we must always show vigilance, preserve our independence and sovereignty, *pay due regard to the task of building the whole country's overall strength and national defence,* and rally support for movements of peace, national independence, democracy and progress around the world.

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# TỔNG HÀNH DINH TRONG MÙA XUÂN TOÀN THẮNG

**Chịu trách nhiệm xuất bản:**
**TRẦN ĐOÀN LÂM**

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| Sửa bản in: | Anh Tuấn |
| Trình bày: | Hoàng Hoài |

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# GENERAL GIÁP

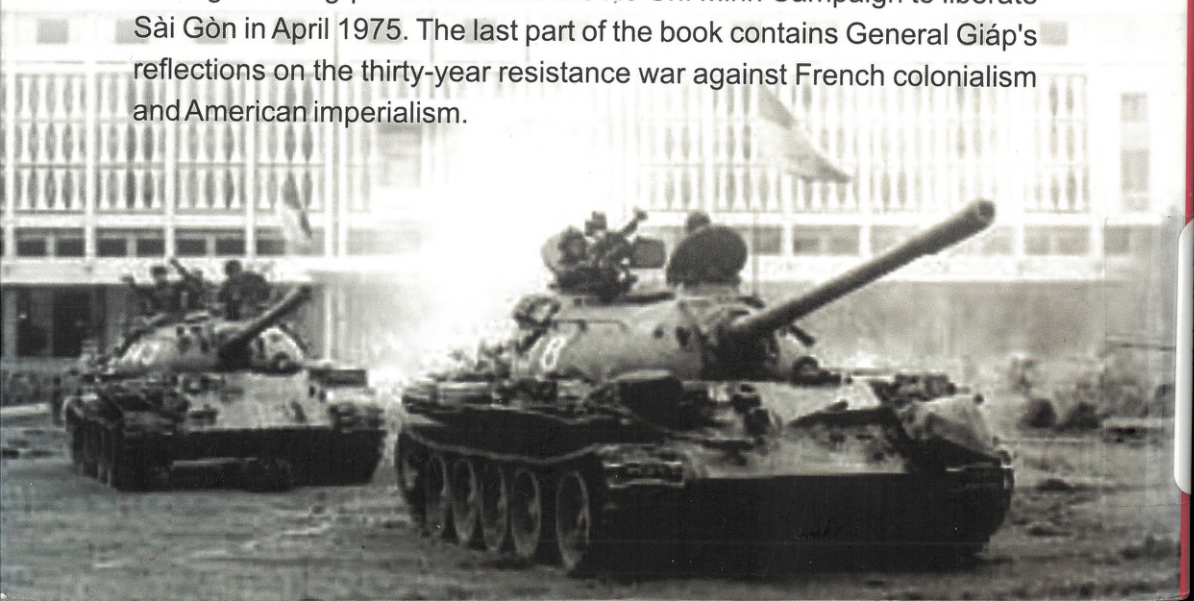
## THE GENERAL HEADQUARTERS IN THE SPRING OF BRILLIANT VICTORY

*General Giáp Remembers the Road to Sài Gòn, 1975*

# GENERAL GIÁP

## THE GENERAL HEADQUARTERS IN THE SPRING OF BRILLIANT VICTORY

General Giáp Remembers the Road to Sài Gòn, 1975

Võ Nguyên Giáp, better known as General Giáp, is the author of this book. He is a former member of the Politburo, former Deputy Prime Minister, and former Minister of Defense. He was born on August 25, 1911, in Quảng Bình Province, Việt Nam. He turns 100 in 2010, an age deserving particular respect in Asian culture. People around the world call him "the five-star general" or "the legendary general," and many encyclopedias describe him as one of the most brilliant military geniuses. When people think of Việt Nam's world-shaking victory at Điện Biên Phủ, the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign, the military theory of "people's war," and the thirty-year war of national liberation, they think of General Giáp.

*The General Headquarters in the Spring of Brilliant Victory* is General Giáp's latest memoir on the Supreme Command's sharp and lucid decisions at the end of the national resistance war. In his book, he writes about great events such as the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in the air during Christmas 1972; and the Tây Nguyên Campaign, which was a strategic turning-point that led to the Hồ Chí Minh Campaign to liberate Sài Gòn in April 1975. The last part of the book contains General Giáp's reflections on the thirty-year resistance war against French colonialism and American imperialism.